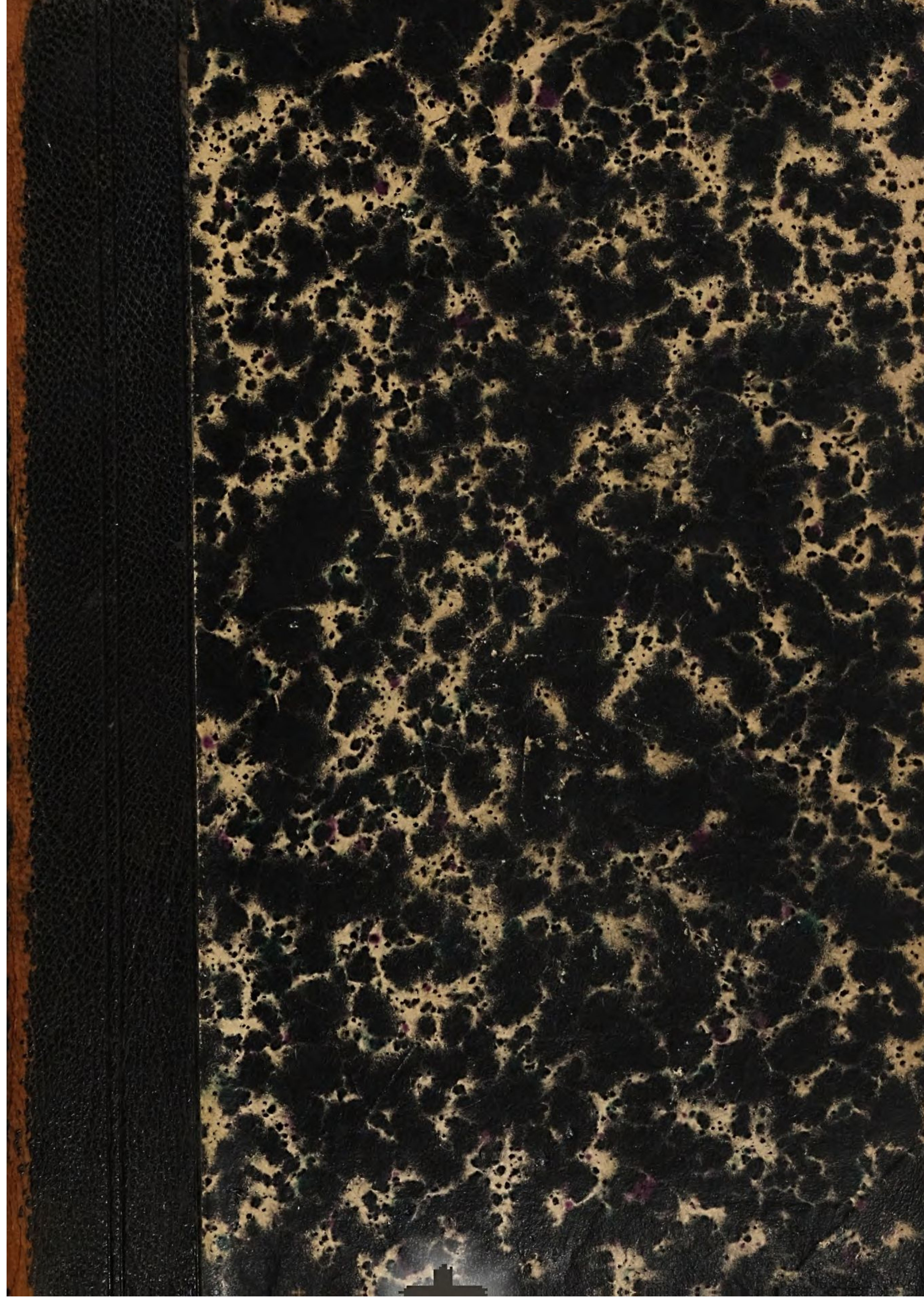




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TAUCHNITZ EDITION.

VOL. 2717.

A WINTER'S TALE BY MARY E. MANN.

IN ONE VOLUME.

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“Pray you, sit by us
And tell 's a tale.”

A WINTER'S TALE

BY

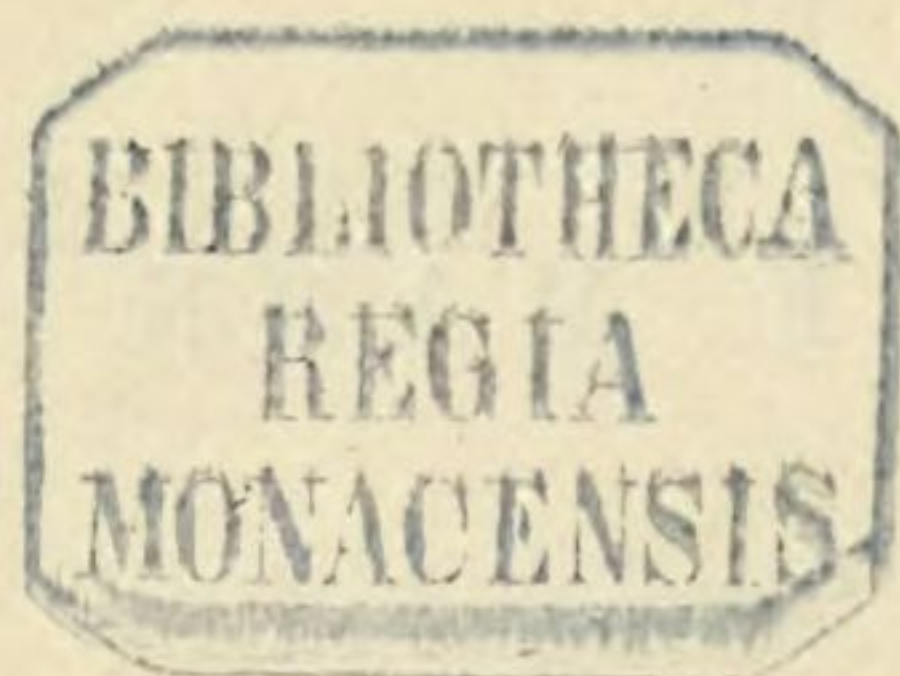
MARY E. MANN.

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LEIPZIG

BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ

1891.



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PART I.

A WINTER'S TALE.

CHAPTER I.

"SUCH STUFF AS DREAMS ARE MADE ON."

HE had had an unsatisfactory day's sport, a long drive homeward through darkness, sleet, and rain, the east wind in his teeth; he was angry, wet, and cold.

He had gone into the library to warm his hands and get a cup of tea before changing his damp clothes. And there was Erica Birch sitting with her back turned upon the tea-table, oblivious of him, his necessities, and her duties as temporary mistress of the place; there was Lucian Harcourt, clasping his knee with his confounded womanish-looking hands, and reeling off for Erica's benefit one of his infernal long-winded yarns!

But, thank goodness, here was his own huge saddle-bag chair, and here was the *Field*; and although Barty hadn't known the Birches seven years he had known them long enough to poke their fires. So he poked

this one very vigorously, and a great blaze sprang up the chimney and fell upon the open page. Fell, besides, upon his own dissatisfied, wind-reddened face as he stooped his head to the flame, on his long sand-coloured moustache and the locks of the same delectable hue which grew sparsely about his temples.

And Harcourt—devil take him for a long-winded bore!—went on about his accursed dream.

“It was about you,” he was saying, looking at Erica. He had a very melodious and flexible voice, and his eyes, which were large and dark and brilliant, were fixed on Erica’s own.

“About me? Oh dear! Nothing very dreadful, was it, Mr. Harcourt?”

“That depends on how you look at things. Death and the grave—do you call them dreadful, for instance?”

“Oh!”

The monosyllable musically quavered with a delicious tremor of fear and expectation.

His hand still clasping his knee, Harcourt pulled himself a little nearer to her, looked her closer in the face, dropped his voice a little.

“There was a grave,” he said. “It was not in the churchyard: it was under a tree in the midst of other trees—a tree that has been struck by lightning. A branch stands out white and leafless—horrid!—like a

skeleton hand pointing. Beneath that was the grave; by its side you and I; and I had—*had* to push you in and bury you——"

"Oh!" (An "Oh!" quite faint with horror now.)

"On the very brink we struggled. Your strength, in my dream, was superhuman; and I knew that the horror of that particular grave was to you above the horror of other graves; and, grasping you still, I leant over and looked in."

"Oh!"

"The grave was deep, and of an inky blackness, and at the bottom of it was—I myself, stark and stiff, and in my grave-clothes. I was looking into my own dead face."

An "Oh!" breathed out in a long shuddering sigh—the girl motionless, her eyes fixed, almost as if fascinated, on the brilliant gaze that held them.

Barty, re-arranging the leaves of his *Field*, smartly smote upon the page he was reading.

"I had a dream also, once," he said, looking at Erica with his unsmiling light-blue eyes. She shuddered again, broke from her rapt contemplation of Harcourt's face, and turned to the speaker.

"It isn't such a thrilling business as Harcourt's, nor will it, I fear, be of such deadly interest to you. Yet it concerns you, and—which is scarcely worth mentioning—it concerns me also."

"Please tell it."

"I dreamt that I was uncommonly cold, uncomfortable, and thirsty, and that you were going to give me a cup of tea."

"I do beg your pardon," Erica said. She laughed as she sprang up and retreated into the shadow where the tea-table stood. "I beg your pardon for two things: for forgetting your tea, and for thinking it possible, even for a minute, that you could condescend to dream of anything."

He accepted her apology with his teacup in unsmiling silence. The girl was always trying to provoke him to repartee, but Barty had decided that a warfare of wits with Erica Birch was hardly worth the trouble—not, in his own phrase, "good enough." He was also of opinion that no keenest retort—piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit—could be so exasperating to the female mind as the exercise of that "*grand talent pour le silence*" for which he was renowned.

Birch's daughter was a pretty and graceful girl enough, but Barty didn't want to be bothered by making himself agreeable to her. He had decided not to begin it. He had come to Birch's because it suited him to turn his back on all that sort of thing. He was not a woman's man. The great attraction of his present

mode of life had been that he would not have to be bothered by women.

That he should be called upon to make himself agreeable had not entered into his arrangement with Birch when, a couple of years ago, he had decided to make part of that gentleman's bachelor establishment. He had gone there to be nearer his brother at Bigby Court and yet independent of him; to shoot his brother's birds and those of other lucky fellows, game-preservers, in the neighbourhood. Failing this sport, he had shown that he wasn't above knocking over Birch's rabbits for him or wading for an hour or so over his ankles in the water of Birch's marshes to get a shot at a wild duck overhead. He was pretty keen on hunting, and appeared at every meet of the staghounds or harriers within reasonable distance. He took a lively interest in the welfare of Birch's horses as well as his own, and he had been known to spend many an hour of an idle day leaning upon the wall of the sty, lost in the contemplation of Birch's pigs.

For the rest, he paid the master of Flint Hall two hundred and fifty a year to keep a couple of horses in his stables, to do as he liked in his house, and, above all, and emphatically—to be *let alone*.

Now, he knew enough of womankind to be sure that if he were once to make himself accessible to this—this innovation—this Erica Birch, he would be allowed

no longer to enjoy the above great desideratum. He was only "a poor devil without fortune or prospect." He wasn't handsome or particularly agreeable. A certain experience which he was not at all likely to forget had proved to him that such attractions as he possessed were not of the order to be appreciated above those of money and position by *all* women. Yet all women were bent on making a fool of the available man—all women were a bore.

It was a bore in the present instance to have to change one's coat, to have to listen to Erica's chatter at dinner instead of to that usual horsy, piggy, sporty, *sensible* talk, broken with the long silences which no one minded. It was a bore to have to give up the book, perched comfortably against the toast-rack, at breakfast; to have to hear her laughing over some idiotic, feeblest joke of Birch's; to hear, even in the distance, the screeching and the eternal strumming of the piano that went on between her and Harcourt after dinner. It was a bore—so indolent and selfish and boorish does one become living Barty's present existence—to open and shut doors, to light candles, to resume, even for the shortest space, "the figments, feints, and formalisms" of civilized social life.

In short, it was a bore to have the harmless, sullen comfort of one's days broken in upon by Birch's confounded daughter.

She was sitting at the little tea-table now, her elbow on it, her chin upon her hand, and she was looking up sentimentally into Harcourt's fine orbs—Harcourt's, whose eyes could only be looked up to by her if she sat down to do it, the poor fellow being of lesser stature than she. Barty, bringing his attention to bear upon the pair again, found that Birch's daughter had started on the recital of her own dreams.

"I have dreamt it not once, but twenty—a hundred times; it is, in fact, my *only* dream," she was saying with a little deprecating laugh. "It shows a terrible want of imagination, doesn't it? And it isn't much of a dream, when one thinks of it. You'll despise it, I know. The horror with which I wake up from it night after night is quite unaccountable. It has nothing to do with graves, or corpses, or horrid trees, lightning-struck, or any of those creepy, *interesting* things. It is simply an empty house; and through it, for some unknown reason, night after night I rush in the very extremity of terror. I do it with a horror upon me which I can't describe—the cause of which, when I awake, I have forgotten. From room to room I hurry—that ineffectual, painful hurry of dreams—through long corridors, down splendid staircases—always handsome, always empty—my feet stumbling, dragging, failing me, my voice frozen into silence with the horror of it. Oh"—Erica concluded with an audible shiver and a change of tone—"oh, I

am so thankful that I wake up before I know what it is that is after me, otherwise I should certainly die of the fright."

Barty could no longer manage the light upon his *Field*. He had toasted the upper half of him; he arose and stood before the fire, teacup in hand, to let the warmth play pleasantly upon the big calves of his knickerbockered legs.

There was something sensible about this Birch's daughter, after all. One could acknowledge that when one was warmer and in a more Christian frame of mind. She acquiesced apparently in that laudable desire of Barty's to be "let alone," and she showed, up to the present, none of that lively desire to be "at him" which was the characteristic of other unattached young women of his acquaintance.

He carried over his teacup to her, and carried it back, refilled, to his post by the fire. A recollection of a certain nightmare of his own, familiar in his younger days, and which still visited him in a certain house where the good people persisted in giving supper after dinner, occurred to him. For a moment he even meditated contributing, for the general benefit, his own experiences of walking about the ceiling like a fly, his head hanging downwards; but he thought better of it. He remembered that, in his dream, people comfortably perambulating after the ordinary humdrum fashion were

never surprised to remark his own singular performances. They, on the contrary, had always treated with a cold indifference that which, in spite of his modesty, had appeared to Barty, even in his dreams, a remarkable feat. And these two young people who were fully occupied in thinking about each other—Barty felt a firm conviction that his nocturnal experiences would fail to interest them also.

While he pondered upon the matter the opportunity was lost, for the pair had flown from the subject of dreams. The parlourmaid had entered, bringing in the lamp, which, since Erica had appeared among them, must be decked in a smart rose-coloured shade. She got up now to move a dish upon the table, and for a moment the rosy glow fell upon the two women—upon Birch's daughter and the parlourmaid standing side by side.

To part of the thought which had been in Barty's mind Erica gave expression when the servant had left the room.

"How beautiful Penny looked in that red light! Did you notice her?" she asked of Harcourt. "What splendid eyes and hair and teeth the girl has, and such a perfect complexion!"

But Harcourt had not noticed. He had been looking at and thinking of something else just then, it appeared.

A sardonic smile flickered across the red face of Barty on the hearth-rug. He had put down his teacup, and was stretching his arms preparatory to quitting the scene, when he had caught an impatient glance in his direction from Harcourt's handsome eyes. But for his own presence on the scene, Barty surmised that the young man would have indicated more clearly the direction of his thoughts and his admiring gaze. The weary sportsman brought down the arms which had been stretched above his head, and clasped his hands at the back of him; widely yawning, he leant backwards, and supported his shoulders against the tall oak mantelshelf, and decided to retain his position yet awhile. He had no sympathy whatever with tomfoolery, and he perceived that on his departure tomfoolery would infallibly ensue.

"My dear Lucie," he said, addressing Harcourt, who was easily made furious by that playful abbreviation of his name, "there was a time, not so long ago, when the various charms of Penelope, as dilated on by you, were like to have bored the rest of us to death. You have the artistic temperament, you know—or so you told us—and the softness of Penelope's eyes, the delicious tints of Penelope's skin, the enchanting line of her face from ear to chin, appealed to you quite forcibly." This with a not very successful imitation of Harcourt's soft, deep tones. "Don't you remember?"

Harcourt's eyes were not expressive of simple good-

will as they turned upon his friend. He was of a nervous and excitable temperament. It was not always an easy matter to him to conceal even a passing emotion. His face quivered for a moment, in a manner familiar to those who knew him, in his effort to answer Barty with satisfactory coolness and indifference.

"Penelope is a handsome girl," he said. "I dare say I said so. I know you did—and pretty frequently." Then he turned again to Erica. "You were right—she is good-looking, after her own fashion," he said. "She is thrown away down here. She ought to go on the stage, or behind a refreshment-bar——"

"Oh, but I really hope she won't," Erica said. "She is so much safer and happier as she is."

"Especially now that she has such a valiant lover to protect her."

"Oh, poor Penny! Has she really a lover, then?"

"Ah? I thought Harcourt knew all about it," Barty remarked confidentially to himself, with a not particularly good-humoured laugh.

Harcourt turned on him fiercely.

"Pray, what do you mean by that?" he demanded. "Mayn't I keep my eyes open as well as you? Even you have wit enough to see when a man is fooling around a woman, I suppose?"

Oh yes. He could see that, certainly, Barty softly acknowledged.

"And who is it that is making love to Penny?" Erica asked.

"I haven't Penelope's confidence in the matter, but I fancy it's—Bush," Harcourt said.

"What, my father's Bush?—the farm steward, Shady Bush?" Erica cried. "Why, what a pity! what a foolish, foolish girl!"

"I mistrust that ill-looking beggar," Barty said shortly.

"Yes. Yet my father has the greatest confidence in the man," Erica said. "I only hope it won't be betrayed."

"If there is anything in phrenology and physiognomy, the man who trusts Mr. Bush deserves to be betrayed."

"I'll tell you a curious thing with regard to that man," Harcourt said, turning his back upon the last speaker and addressing Erica once more in the mysterious lowered tone it pleased him to affect with her. "Do you believe in second-sight? I don't mean in this case in the seeing of visions—although I, for one, will not aver I don't believe in them—but in a kind of inner consciousness relating to incidents, places, people. Of course you do. Everyone has known that haunting sensation of having before played a certain part in the drama of the day, of having spoken the same words, of having listened to the same phrase, of having looked upon the same scene, in a prior state of existence.

Well, I have that feeling in peculiar strength at times, and, thinking over it, I have come to the conclusion it does not with me refer to the past—it is prophetic. When my eyes first fall on people who so affect me, I am conscious only of a vague, uneasy sensation—of a something floating—floating, which I can't grasp. With a painful effort of will, of concentration, this haunting something becomes clearer, yet too often ultimately evades me still. But sometimes, in a flash, a revelation is made, a perfect mental vision presents itself——"

"Get on," Barty said irreverently. "There may be time for all that to-morrow perhaps. You were saying something about Bush, you know."

The hands that clasped Harcourt's knee, as he leant forward in his confidential attitude against Erica's chair, strained and tightened for a minute's silence; the mobile lips under the slight dark moustache trembled and twitched after their familiar fashion; then Harcourt took up the thread of his tale again.

"It is so with me in the case of this man—this Bush. When I see him now, standing in your father's office, his hat in his hand, awaiting orders—when I meet him in his best Sunday suit, slouching in the odour of sanctity toward his own house or his chapel—when I come upon him, as I have done once or twice lately, paying his sheepish addresses to the parlour-maid whom Barty so much admires——"

He paused slightly here with bent head, as if awaiting Barty's denial.

"Get on," that gentleman said again, unmoved by the insinuation.

"Then I also see his double—another Shady Bush; a Shady Bush of the future—a future how near or far I cannot tell." Harcourt's dark eyes seemed to be turned inward, as if he really were describing some mental vision which quite distinctly he saw. "I see him with his brutish, unmoved face, his unlovely garments, standing before me; and they, and his coarse hands, and his muddy, hobnailed boots, and even the coarse hair and ragged whiskers of him, are sprinkled and spattered with blood."

"Oh, please don't! Oh, Mr. Harcourt, how very horrid! How could you!" Erica cried, and shivered and put up her white hands about her ears, after the manner of women, who yet would not for worlds exclude one ghastly detail with their dainty fingers. "My father will have to get rid of Shady Bush. It is not really nice to have that kind of dreadful person about a lonely house."

"In the exercise of his humane professional duties, our friend Shady has probably been bleeding a calf or sticking a pig," Barty ventured. "Does your vision stop at Shady's appearance, Harcourt, or is it obliging enough to go farther and reveal his victim?"

Harcourt knew how to make his effects. With his hands still clasped about his knee, he lowered it, and, drawing closer to her, raised his eyes to Erica's face. His deep, sweet tones sank to the lowest, clearest whisper.

"He has committed murder!" he said.

A minute later Barty had raised his big shoulders from the mantel-board and taken himself off to dress for dinner.

"What a theatrical beggar that is!" he said to himself with a certain contemptuous amusement, as he went his way.

CHAPTER II.

BIRCH OF FLINT HALL.

ERICA BIRCH'S father—a widower with an only remaining child—had been eminently unsuccessful in his career, but had managed to carry a light heart through his misfortunes and to shake trouble from his mind as the proverbial duck shakes water from its back. He had early in middle life succeeded to Flint Hall and a nice compact little landed property. He had a fair income, a handsome wife, and half the county for his friends. A son and a daughter had been born to him, more money had been left to him, more friends had arisen. His house had been open to them all, his coverts, his stables—his purse to those who needed. Everyone knew or had heard of Dicky Birch, the best fellow, the most popular man, in the county. The master of the foxhounds dying, he, amid general approbation, had come forward to fill that gentleman's place. Very worthily indeed he filled it, putting quite into the shade the hospitalities and the hunting virtues of his predecessor.

With apparently complete satisfaction to himself,

with outwardly undiminished glory, he held the post for five years. During that period, however, he had discovered an intrigue between his wife and his dearest friend, and had forgiven her, to be again deceived. His only boy, about whose beauty and whose precocious horsemanship he had bored his friends not a little, and of whom he was inordinately fond and proud, had been kicked to death by a new pony, the father's birthday gift to him; his house had become a scene of riot, his land of neglect, his purse was ruined, his estate heavily mortgaged. At the expiration of the five years Dicky Birch's career was run, and he was, with considerable sharpness, pulled up.

That was ten years ago now, and more. Since which time Dicky had scrambled on, not unhappily, if without success. Every year found him in further money troubles, found another portion of the little estate in the market, found his relations with his bankers less satisfactory. Yet in some mysterious fashion he managed to keep his hunter still, to make his house pleasant to his neighbours, to send his daughter to expensive schools. Among his many friends there had been a good fellow or two who had not failed him at a pinch, and his own fortunes had never been at so low an ebb that there were not also among them some, more unlucky than he, whom, with a rashly generous hand, he could help.

He never seemed to regret anything very deeply—poor Birch!—nor was seen to brood over his troubles; but the horror of being alone, which in some degree he had always experienced, certainly grew upon him. Affairs being pretty desperate with him, the suggestion was at length made to him to receive young men into his house as a means of putting a little money into his purse, and he had not evinced that objection to the course which most men so situated would have shown.

Since the adoption of this plan things had looked up, financially, with Dicky Birch. He made a point of “his men,” as he called them, being in possession of money and position, and he charged a good round sum for their maintenance. He was thus enabled, if he did not actually put money in his pocket, to keep a fuller staff of servants, a good table—an excellent glass of wine he had always managed to have. He liked to see pleasant young faces about his table; he liked to see his stables well filled, even if the horses in them were not all his own; he liked to ride over what remained to him of his little estate (his last tenant had failed, and the cultivation of his property was carried on, after a fashion, by Dicky Birch himself now) with a companion or two to divert his easily distracted thought, and to keep far from him that heartache which surely must have been lurking for him in solitude.

As for the young fellows themselves, they found a

life which suited them in free and pleasant quarters, in a neighbourhood both sociable and hospitable, where hunting was attainable and game plentiful. Dicky Birch had no trouble in maintaining his complement of "men." Ostensibly, of course, they came to him as pupils, but this primary object was always very comfortably lost sight of by both parties. Those who came for a season or so to learn the management of their own or other people's land, remained for years to ride and drive and shoot and hunt, and to "have a jolly time."

Birch, with all his folly, his weakness, his superficialness, was a gentleman. He took care only that the men about him should be gentlemen too, and for the rest was liberal as the day, frank and careless and lighthearted as any youngster among them. He was quite open with his "men," and, indeed, with anyone who cared to listen, and made no secret of the state of his affairs:

"It's only indirectly, you know, that I make you fellows pay," he would say to them. "If the whole six of you were always at home, why, it couldn't be done. But one or other of you, sometimes two or three of you at a time, are always going off somewhere—and although I know it puts money into my pocket, I'm hanged if I don't hate to see the backs of you—and that's how we do it, don't you see?"

Just now it is Christmas-time, and four of "the

men" are away. Of those left, Barty is due in the morning at his brother's place, Bigby Court, which is only a mile or two away, and Harcourt, either unblessed with friends desiring his company for the festive season, or too satisfied with his quarters to leave them, has announced his intention of staying for the present at Flint Hall.

Of all the half-dozen men who pay for the right to sit at Birch's table, Lucian Harcourt is probably the one least likely to have been chosen to spend Christmas with him, had the choice been given him, by Dicky, for the two have not so much as an idea in common. Harcourt knows as little of country pursuits and of manly sports as Birch of music and singing—although, to be sure, the latter has a tuneful voice of his own, and can give "We'll all go a-hunting to-day," or, "Drink, puppy, drink," on the slightest provocation, and in a manner highly satisfactory to the singer himself.

Harcourt has not come to Flint Hall with the same ostensible end in view as Birch's other "men"; he does not stay for the gratification of the same tastes. He has plenty of money at command; he is not looking forward to farming either the cramped fields of England or the vast acres of a newer world; he is not likely to inherit an estate of his own to manage. His father is a titled physician of great repute, and Lucian is his only son. Of a nervous, highly-strung temperament, of

somewhat delicate health, it has been thought that the quiet and the wholesomeness of country life may be good for him.

"You see, I'd rather the fellow had taken himself off," Dicky Birch said to his crony and prime favourite among the men, Barty, they two sitting up over a friendly pipe after the young people had betaken themselves to bed. "Far rather," he repeated emphatically, and stretched his long, slim legs before him, and looked at Barty with the blue, bright eyes, that shone with a boyish light of simplicity and confidence in his clear-cut, handsome face.

"Tell him so," Barty advised briefly.

"And turn a man out of my doors at this season of the year? No. They can say a great deal that's bad of me. They can say Dicky Birch is an old fool, they can call him a rascal if they like; they can say that he's squandered his money, killed his son, turned his wife out of doors, by heavens!" (Birch's troubles, as has been said, were common property; that may have been one reason why he himself found their burden so light)—"they may say all this, and more; but they shan't say his hand and his door weren't open at Christmas-time; they shan't say there wasn't room at Flint Hall for all who sought shelter there at that time of peace and goodwill. I'll tell you what, Barty, if I'd my way, I'd have the old place crammed from floor to roof;

I'd have you all here, I wouldn't let one of you off; I'd——”

“What the dickens have you got to complain of, then? You've got Harcourt, at all events. You're welcome to him, for me. I see no fear that anyone will be after depriving you of him——”

“You know how it is, Barty, my dear fellow”—this with a lowering of the voice and that air of astuteness and caution that he was fond of assuming, but which sat somewhat quaintly upon the simple, garrulous old fellow. “You remember that I have a daughter. You can see, without my saying it, I suppose, that she is a beautiful girl; and good as an angel, that I swear, although her old fool of a father has spent the fortune that should have found her a husband. You know that—thanks to the muddle I have made—I cannot, in my declining years, have the comfort of the companionship of this charming daughter of mine. I have to send her among strangers, sir; to banish her to the cold charities of—of her Aunt Eliza. Although I admit, mind you, that Eliza's monstrously fond of her—as who wouldn't be?—and precious glad, no doubt, to have such a handsome girl to be seen about in her carriage and to make her house pleasant; still, as far as I'm concerned, Barty, the fact remains that she's as good as lost to me. My own child and I are all but strangers!”

Barty, who had heard the story often and often before, now, coldly unmoved, smoked on.

"What would be said of me?" Birch, no whit discouraged, proceeded. "What would be said if I, having got a lot of rich young fellows about my house, put my penniless girl in their way? Shouldn't I be accused of trying to catch one of them for my pretty daughter? And so I sacrifice my feelings as a father, Barty; and my poor child goes to the wall; and my Erica loses the inestimable advantage of a parent's protection. Yet, hang it all, man!" (a little fiercely, as if Barty had loudly disapproved of the course)—"nature is nature, whatever you may say; and at Christmas-time, bless my soul! it behoves a man, however deep in the mire he may be—it behoves him to remember he *is* a father; and once a year, all you fellows being safely out of the way, Erica comes to me and asks a friend or two down. And a few young people, who wouldn't have a lively time in their own homes, come over, and the child looks forward to a pleasant holiday. But now it's awkward, Barty—deuced awkward."

"As how?"

Barty's voice was indifferent, his position lazy in the extreme. The most active of men in pursuit of his own amusements and occupations, he had a way of idling, when the fit was on him, as if his soul were in the plan of doing it thoroughly. He knew how to com-

pose his large frame in his chair in a manner so comfortable that, save to replenish his pipe or to lay it down, he would not move a finger for hours. He did not, as he asked his laconic question, so much as turn his head, but his light-blue eyes turned upon his host with a very shrewd glance of inquiry.

That they were shrewd eyes was about the only thing that could be said in their favour. They were by no means large, nor especially well-shaped, nor was their want of colour and beauty of form atoned for by shading lash nor genial expression. They were too pale for the weather-toned redness of his face, and Erica Birch had already decided that they were cold-looking—the last attribute of masculine orbs of which a pretty and somewhat coquettish young woman is likely to approve. Yet were these same eyes of eminent service to their owner. They were quick, and they were shrewd. They had been used in earlier days to gleam and glitter with fun. And at least one woman was living who could have told that Hugh Barty's eyes were not always cold.

“As how?”

“Well—there's this—*Harcourt*. I don't know much about Harcourt himself or his people. There's evidently no lack of money—an only son. Father—pleasant man, wonderfully pleasant; if my terms had been double I should have got them without a murmur—left his

son beneath my roof with every confidence in me—every confidence, he said. Well, but would he have done that if he'd known I was going to throw his son—and heir, mind you—into the society of my daughter?”

“Why not?” Barty inquired drily. “He'd have offered you his best thanks, no doubt, as Harcourt is ready to do himself. After all, is there so much danger? Harcourt is a susceptible little fellow, and Miss Birch undoubtedly attractive; yet a girl may be pretty and charming, but every spoony fellow who looks at her can't marry her. That's a fact which forces itself upon the intelligence of men early in life. They get along somehow, in face of the deprivation, and make fools, more or less, of themselves in new directions. Perhaps, after all, no evil will result to either, spite of Harcourt having met your daughter.”

But Dicky Birch did not wish to have his doubts set so easily at rest.

“Unfortunately, the experiment has been tried before,” he said, “and with unsatisfactory results—decidedly unsatisfactory results.”

Barty turned his eyes away from his host, and gave a short laugh.

“As how?” he inquired again.

“She came over—Eliza herself brought her over when Erica first left school. Eliza is a stickler, I can

tell you, although she is my sister—a perfect dragon of the proprieties. Well, the child was only a chit of seventeen—not a patch for looks upon what she is now—and the whole boiling of them fell in love with her! It's a fact, Barty, and it was a deuced unpleasant fact to me, I can tell you."

"The whole six?"

"Two were away, fortunately. Four of them was enough—quite sufficient!"

"What happened?"

"Two of them—the poor young fools!—got to fisticuffs there in the stable-yard. Dallas fell ill, and had to have his mother over to nurse him. When Eliza intercepted a letter from Briggs, a boy of nineteen or so, threatening to blow his brains out if Erica didn't smile at him that night at dinner, we thought it was about time to send my lady home."

"The lady," Barty said, using the little finger of his shapely hand as a tobacco-stopper—"the lady being, of course, heart-whole. H'm! Was it so bad as that? Then Harcourt must look out, that's all."

"You see, I can tell you these things, Barty," Birch went on, with affectionate confidence, "because I don't look upon you as one of the others. You're a man of the world, my dear fellow, and—and not a youth."

"Not a youth by any means," Barty admitted. He had put down his pipe, and he passed his hand as he

spoke over the bald patch on the crown of his head, over the soft yellow hair that grew sparsely above his temples, down his broad brow and big nose, finally letting the ends of his moustache slide slowly through his fingers. The moustache, which, to say truth, was handsome and luxuriant, although the hair atop did leave something to be desired, hid a smile now, flickering for a minute at the corners of the mouth. "You might even describe me as a middle-aged man of the world, to say nothing of my being also an exceedingly needy and hard-up man of the world, while you are about it, you know," he added.

Which description, by the way, would have been by no means an accurate one, a man of thirty-five being, from some points of view, something of a juvenile still, and an income of five hundred a year one not to be despised in the present period of financial depression.

"I wish I could be with you to see you over your difficulties, Birch," Barty said, as he got himself out of his chair and lit his candle. "If I wasn't due at Bigby, I'd see what I could do for you. For I'm not troubled, as you may have noticed, with over-sensitiveness, and should have no scruples whatever about spoiling sport."

As it happened, he had, after all, the opportunity for indulging in that amiable pastime, and of doing his old friend the favour of playing gooseberry to Birch's

daughter and her eligible possible admirer. For, contrary to his expectations, Barty, for almost the first time in his life, was not called on to spend his Christmas at Bigby Court.

CHAPTER III.

HUGH BARTY.

ON the morning of Christmas Eve Barty had awakened with a vague feeling of there being something unpleasant before him. He had deferred inquiry into the sensation as long as possible. Presently, in spite of himself, he had become aware that the prophetic gloom which enwrapped his soul was due to the fact that he was to be called on to "go through Christmas."

He would have to go through it with some pretence at cheerfulness, too—to put off for a time his grumpiness and laziness, the habit of doing what he liked, saying what he liked, being silent when he chose—in order to make himself pleasant to a lot of people, none the more agreeable to him through the fact of their being mostly in some way related to him.

Whereupon he declared to himself—by no means for the first time—that he hated Christmas; that all its posturing and grinning and hand-shaking made him sick; that its infernally hollow pretence at merriment and goodwill caused him to feel more desperately flat

and glum and misanthropic than at any other period of the year; and finally, that a family gathering was, of all the trials to which flesh is heir, the most intolerable.

All this, and much more to the same effect, he had said to himself, kicking viciously at the bed-clothes, looking forward to the familiar programme of his stay at Bigby Court. Yet when, a few hours afterwards, he being almost in the act of starting on his visit, a note was brought to him freeing him from the necessity of sacrificing himself on the altar of family affection, he felt a little lost and put out, and quite unaccountably hurt and dispirited.

"My brother's boy is down with measles," he said slowly, having read twice through the note which had been put into his hand.

He was due at Bigby early in the morning, and he had been standing with his back to the fire after breakfast, waiting for his dog-cart to come round, when the messenger from the Court had arrived. His appearance was a matter of no moment to him, yet was he always well dressed—by instinct, as it were—and unconsciously spick and span. He was of a height and build to make him conspicuous in most companies, and his air of natural distinction often cheated people into the belief that he was a handsome man, when in reality he was nothing of the sort.

Erica was still seated at the breakfast-table awaiting her father. Although that meal was rarely over before eleven o'clock, Dicky Birch had never been known to appear in time to partake of it with the other members of his household. His daughter looked up from her own letters now as the man on the hearthrug spoke.

"They aren't wanting me at Bigby, after all."

"Oh! And are you sorry?" Erica inquired, the smile which one of her correspondents had called there dying off her face as she spoke.

"Sorry that Hughie, my godson—the hope of my house—has the measles?"

"That is not what I meant exactly—but—yes. Are you sorry for that?"

"Miss Birch, do you suppose that I am a monster in human shape?"

The smile came back swiftly to her face. She was very pretty, with the dimple in her round pale cheeks, the half-veiled sparkle of her gray eyes, when she smiled.

"I don't know what you are," she said. "How should I know? I am trying to find out."

"I am exceedingly flattered. Would not Harcourt be of use to you in your researches? He has a high opinion of me, I think."

"Thanks. I prefer to make my discoveries myself."

"Then, as I am aware that I only need to be known

to be highly regarded, I shall be happy to afford you any assistance in my power."

"Are you sorry that your little nephew has the measles?"

"I am. To enable you to appreciate the beauty and unselfishness of that reply, I must trouble you with a few points of my personal history."

"Yes. I *want* to hear them. Go on."

"To begin with, then, this young gentleman's father, who is also my half-brother, is a dozen years older than myself. A man of forty isn't generally such a fool as to rush into matrimony. Consequently, when suddenly, seven years ago, this fellow without the slightest warning committed that act of madness, I had every right—had I not, seeing that I was heir-presumptive to the family estates, such as they are?—to consider myself ill-used."

"Certainly not. You ought to have rejoiced in your brother's happiness, however late it had come."

"Ah! We won't stay to consider now the blessedness or—otherwise—of the matrimonial state. I am aware that the feminine eye regards the question from its own point of view. To proceed: Seeing that this brother of mine married a childless widow of his own age, I was justified, perhaps, in taking it for granted that there would be no children. Therefore, when my nephew, this hero of the measles, was born, was I not

also justified in feeling myself mightily cheated and aggrieved?"

"Of course you were not. It is too horrid of you!"

"Not even when I remind you of the fact that Bill's—my brother's—is a very precarious life? That the doctors have, one and all, assured him he won't live to make old bones? That but for the existence of this dear nephew of mine I inherit? That I, with the tastes and propensities of a rich man, am wretchedly poor?"

"No, a thousand times! How can you speak of such things! It is like the babes in the wood, and you are the wicked uncle."

"The wicked uncle would have revelled in this attack of measles; and have I not given you my assurance that I am sorry?"

"That is certainly a sign of grace—if one might believe you. I am not sure. And are you sorry, besides, not to be going to Bigby? Won't you be terribly bored here with us? Will you be able to put up with Christmas as we shall have it? My young cousins are coming to Flint Hall, and one or two others. We shall probably be frivolous and noisy, and altogether certainly too merry and happy for your condition, Mr. Barty."

Barty, coldly considering the mocking face of her with his pale-blue orbs, shook his head.

"Yes. I don't think I could stand that kind of thing," he said gravely.

He still held in his hand the letter which had been brought to him. His eyes fell upon it once more.

"We did not put you off until the last moment, because Hughie was so anxious to see you. He had been looking forward so much to Christmas and 'Uncle Hugh.' All through the night he was asking for you, but is delirious now, and does not know anyone."

Slowly Hugh read the few lines in his sister-in-law's large and inky scrawl, then turned and dropped the little note upon the flames.

"I think I'll go up to London, and have Christmas all to myself at the Carlton," he said presently.

"Oh!"

"I should think if one were in the mood to touch the bottommost depths of dejection, one would reach it on a Christmas Day at a London hotel or club."

"Probably. But there is surely no necessity upon you to perform that feat. Are you, after all, so very disappointed? Don't I remember hearing you, only yesterday, speak of your approaching visit with anything but enthusiasm?"

"I dare say. It seemed like a bore, of course; but it's a worse bore to be thrown on my own resources, and to be called on to make my own plans."

"Let me make them for you. Stay here."

Erica Birch possessed, among the many other gifts bestowed on her by a bountiful nature, a very charming voice. It was musical and clear, and capable, on occasion, with the smallest expenditure of words, of expressing a great deal. She was not exactly a flirt, perhaps—that is, if she was, she was a very dangerous flirt, for she did not look the part, and her methods were a good deal concealed—but for some reason that seductive voice of hers did take on a certain tone in the above tiny phrase which was, and was meant to be, hard to resist. It may have been simply that she was interested in what she had heard of Barty from her father, who was, as a matter of fact, a good deal dominated by the younger man; it may have been that she felt a pang of pity, woman-like, at his loneliness and glumness at that season; there may have been a dozen other reasons, known and unknown to Erica herself. But certain it is that the dark-lashed gray eyes looked at the red-faced man very kindly and persuasively; that that innocent little suggestion, “Stay here,” was pronounced in a tone which had the effect of putting Mr. Hugh Barty at once on the alert.

He had been feeling friendly to Birch’s daughter that morning, and had consequently ventured on unbending a little before her. The girl really seemed as sensible as she was pretty, when Harcourt was not by to make a fool of her, he had thought. But here was

the cloven hoof! The fact was, as Barty had assured himself for years, you positively could not be on terms of acquaintanceship for five minutes with a woman. You had to be her lover—or nothing!

That you were a poor devil without a prospect in the world, and getting on towards middle life, and with no particular good looks to boast of, and with a manner the reverse of urbane—these things did not signify a ha'penny. None the more could you make a friend of a woman. They simply would not understand, would think you were driving at something else, and would be “at you” at once.

Why should Birch's daughter have proved an exception? She was not an exception. She was “at him” now.

“I am persuading Mr. Barty to stay here with us,” Erica went on to Harcourt, who just then came into the room. “Would not that be preferable to a lonely Christmas in London, Mr. Harcourt?”

“There is more *space* in London,” Harcourt said. He, too, had gone to stand before the hearth, where Barty's broad back was monopolizing the fire. “By paying for it there, I dare say he might get not only a fireplace, but a room all to himself.”

Whereat Barty, immovable, smiled, and looked down upon the young man at his side, who, for his part, was at once reminded that his own head did not reach to

the level of Barty's shoulders. Miserably aware that he had shown himself off by contrast a thing of puny and insignificant presence, he left the fire-place and flung himself in an attitude into a chair, where, his elbow on its back, his chin propped on the palm of his hand, he bit at his finger-tips and looked up under his brows at Barty.

"Harcourt would like to have me with him at the festive season, I am sure," Barty said, with a grin. "Sorry to disappoint you, Lucie, but I think I'll tear myself away from you for a time."

CHAPTER IV.

"LET HIM PASS FOR A MAN."

"LET him go," Harcourt said, with a swift change of attitude and expression, turning to Erica as Barty left the room. "What made you ask him to stay, I wonder?"

"Why not?" Erica asked. She looked frankly in the young fellow's dark and brilliant eyes. The complexion of his handsome-featured face, seen by daylight, was of a yellowy pallor. There was a curious restlessness of lip and eye, which struck some people disagreeably. There was about him, beside, a quickness of movement and a prodigality of gesture unfamiliar, and not always pleasing to the taste of lethargic English folk. "Don't you like Mr. Barty, then?" Erica asked him.

"Like him?" Harcourt tossed back his head, and all the fine soft hair, which was worn long enough to be stirred and rearranged with every movement of the restless head, flew back, exposing the well-formed brow. "Like Barty, you ask? Well, at times I despise him. A fellow without a thought beyond the day's brutal

pastime, without appreciation of the only things which make life worth living, without an aspiration, without a soul!"

"Mr. Harcourt! Good gracious! is he so bad as that?"

"And then there are times when with all my own soul I envy him. He is an animal, if you like—but what a magnificent animal!"

"Why, he is rather ugly than otherwise, is he not?"

"What has that to do with it? Ugly! If I were a woman, I would value the beauty of a man's face not that!" He snapped his fingers loudly; his dark eyes were shining. It seemed to Erica that his own suddenly kindled face was for the moment splendidly handsome. "What a frame the fellow has! what a strength! what a power of endurance! When I forget myself, and stand for an instant beside him, what am I in your eyes? An incarnate feebleness—a pigmy!"

"Oh, but that is nonsense, Mr. Harcourt!" Erica declared, blushing and laughing a little uncomfortably. "You exaggerate the difference between Mr. Barty's size and your own."

"Miss Birch, imagine for one instant a struggle between that man and me—a struggle for life. Although I possess both heart and brain, while he has neither—although I have a courage equal to his—although life to me is a more precious thing and death a thousand

times more hideous—although I might be nerved by desperation, by hate, and by an agony of desire to kill him—should I have a chance? No. He would shake the life out of me as a dog shakes the life from a rat!”

“What a horrid idea! Please don’t let us talk of it.”

“Have you noticed what a grip he has? Have you watched his hand close on anything? Look at mine!” He drew out, with a gesture of infinite disgust, a yellowy-white hand for her inspection, small and delicately modelled as her own. “Ah, you laugh at me!” he said, drawing it back, and with a slight change of tone. “To me it is no laughing matter. I tell you the insignificance of my form has been the curse of my life!”

A sudden moodiness came over him; he clasped his hands loosely before him, and, leaning forward, glowered at the carpet with a sullen face.

Erica glanced at him with a perplexed contrition. She was unfortunately troubled with something akin to that sense of humour which men deny to women.

“If this little man is going to be so ridiculous, and I mayn’t laugh at him, I shall die of suppressed emotion,” she said to herself.

“You must forgive me,” she said aloud. “I was not laughing at you, but at the strangeness of your ideas.

Why, Mr. Harcourt, thousands no bigger than you go through life considering themselves fine men. They have admiring wives, and children who look up to them, and who would not have them an inch taller on any account. They——"

"They have minds proportioned to their bodies—mine is not. Miss Birch, I have imagination, I have fervour, I have—I know it—ability. Splendid dreams come to me, grand ideas. There are glorious minutes when I forget my stature, the feebleness of my frame. I feel within myself the strength of a giant! I feel an energy that must prevail—a will strong enough to achieve. My soul rises strong and buoyant—for the moment I am more than mere man. By chance I catch sight of myself in the glass. What do I see?"

By the chair on which he sat stood the sideboard, a handsome piece of furniture of carved oak, its back panelled with looking-glass. He had turned swiftly as he spoke, and sat with his eyes fixed upon his image in the glass.

Erica, following, in spite of herself, his gaze, saw that in the eyes reflected in the glass—the eyes so large, so luminous, so quick, that they would be best described by the penny fictionist phrase of "flashing"—there was a look of positive hatred and fierce self-disgust. She saw, too, at once, with dismay, that the wild rodomontade to which he had treated her, and

which had appeared to her only so much ridiculous and empty talk, was serious earnest with him, and she was sorry and embarrassed and silent.

Swiftly he turned back to her again.

"Do you wonder that I hate more fortunate men?" he asked of her. Before she could answer, with one of his disconcertingly quick movements he had dragged his chair to her side, and leaned upon the table against which she sat to look up in Erica's face. "You will let me talk to you?" he asked, his voice very deep and low and persuasive. "Here"—with a comprehensive wave of his hand to include Dicky Birch, his "men," the village of Grainge, and its neighbourhood—"here there is no one to whom I can speak. To talk to you is a relief, and a delight, and a most precious privilege."

"Then pray talk to me," she said, smiling kindly. "Tell me anything you like. I am a good listener, and most willing that you should make use of me."

"He has been brooding over his appearance—which, by the way, is a quite presentable appearance," said Erica to herself, "until he has become unhinged and morbid. How ridiculous and unmanly! And how bad for him!"

"You must understand," he went on in the same low tone, his eyes, very melancholy now, upon her face—"you must understand that this—this misfortune of

mine has deprived me of a career. It has made of me an objectless, ambitionless, hopeless man, eating out my own heart."

"Oh, but how wrong of you! How blind! What a mistake! Do you know, Mr. Harcourt, that your notion of anything unusual in you is a delusion—simply that? It is awkward for me to have to speak to you about your personal appearance, but——"

She looked at him, and stopped and laughed and blushed. He had not heeded. Too eager to relieve his mind of its familiar burden, he rushed on:

"My father, you may have heard, is a physician in London—a specialist. He is coining money; it is as nothing to him; his heart is in his work. If he could be a beggar in rags, not deprived of his profession, he would be as happy as he is now, rolling in his gold. I am his only child. Something of his talent I inherit, and more—more than his enthusiasm! If I could be anything on earth I would be a doctor. A glorious career stretches before me——"

"Then what a thousand pities—what a sin—to turn your back! And all for what? A morbid fancy—a cause that does not exist!"

"Ah, if you knew the fascination it has for me! I have studied the human frame. I am familiar with the dissecting-room. I have accompanied my father to the operating theatre——"

"Dreadful!"

"Not at all. There is, you know, such a sense of power," he said softly, looking at her, the pupils of his eyes contracted for the moment, his lids half lowered. "Such excitement! Think of it. A human being lies there before you—insensible, defenceless, quite helpless—at your mercy. At yours, bending above him, the knife in your hand——"

"And with the knowledge and skill to restore him to consciousness, to life—and perhaps to health!"

"Of course—yes—just so," he acquiesced, and dropped his eyes from her and fell back in his chair.

Erica divined from a something of flatness in his tone that she had disappointed him by the commonplaceness of her remark. She felt that the subject, besides being a not very pleasant one, was totally out of her province, yet, having so recently invited the young man's confidences, she did not like to check them so early in their flow.

"There must be a great deal that is very terrible to a sensitive person in all those dreadful details," she said. "And I suppose a great doctor must be a sensitive man. I met a very clever man lately at my uncle's house—he is a celebrated surgeon now—and he told me that the first time he went into a dissecting-room he fainted."

"Oh yes," Harcourt said; "they do. But, do you

know, I can live very comfortably in that atmosphere. Nothing of that kind affects me. On my first appearance there I remember there was a row going on among the fellows, and as I walked across the room something one of them had flung at another missed its object and hit me on the mouth. It was a woman's arm——"

Erica gave a cry, and started back from him in horror and indignation.

"Does that seem so dreadful to you?" he asked. He smiled at her horrified face. "One gets so easily used to horrors, you know. My father has told me that in his time—they were a rougher set in those days—he has seen the men cut up their bread and cheese with the knives they'd been using in the dissecting-room. Oh, it was not squeamishness that induced me to give up the profession. You know what it was. I have told you. There were plenty of people less merciful to my shortcomings than you, Miss Birch, who did not leave me in any doubt as to the wisdom of my proceeding. Every coarse brute among those medical students, with his proper complement of inches, but with the due proportion of brain left entirely out of his structure, every such an one felt that he had a right to make merry over the poor devil whose brains had not been forgotten, however inadequate his stature.

"Of course, that I had to endure—could have endured, perhaps, and made them rue it—but where was

the use? What chance of success had I? What man would have confidence in the opinion of a doctor whose head did not reach to his patient's shoulder? What lady would select an undersized, ill-developed specimen such as I for her medical attendant? I told my father this many times, and he agreed with me. He had always been inclined, indeed, to keep me as one of the useless do-nothings of the earth, and he was relieved—relieved that I relinquished the plan.”

“And so you came down here?”

“Not immediately. Oh no! My father had me travel. I went with a fellow he chose—a splendidly strong fellow—a friend of my father's. I got to hate him in time—he was so magnificently built, and had such iron hands—I grew to hate him. We went half over the world. Afterwards my father wanted me to go on living with this fellow—he was a doctor, and my health isn't of the best, you know—but I let my father know that I was sick of the man, and so I came down here. I can't stand the roar of London; it affects my head. I suffer horribly at times with my head——”

“I am so sorry.”

“You are not sorry that I came? Miss Birch, I am grateful to fate for one thing since I have known you: for having led me across your path. The very moment that my eyes fell on you—let me tell you this—I felt an impulse of confidence in you. You came in, leaning

on your father's arm, and your face was flushed from your windy drive, and all this mass of rich brown hair was blown up in beautiful confusion about your little seal-skin hat, and you were smiling into your father's face; and then you turned to me, and I said to myself, 'Now, if she looks at me with contempt in her eyes, I would rather she drove a knife into my heart.' And your eyes turned kindly upon me with a smile in them as frank and as generous as the sunlight.

"Miss Birch, all women are good to me. Curiously enough, I am not conscious of my own deficiencies in their society. I shrink from the companionship of men; I am happy in that of women. There are women who have been angels to me—angels to soothe and heal. I love all women—a beautiful woman I adore——"

"Eh? What's that? Who do you adore?" Dicky Birch inquired, sauntering in at that moment—fresh and rosy, with glossy iron-gray hair and whiskers brushed upward, as was Dicky Birch's fashion of wearing them—to his breakfast. "Pray who is it, now, that Harcourt adores?" he asked, turning to his daughter, as Lucian, disgusted with the interruption, got up from his chair and went from the room.

"Why, dear daddy," Erica said, kissing him—there would have been something incongruous in applying to Dicky the serious name of "father," and Erica never did it—"dear daddy, Mr. Harcourt was just making

confession to me that he is a universal lover. Now, auntie always tells me that universal lovers are the safest acquaintances girls can have—providing, of course, that the girls understand the position. Auntie would be entirely at ease about me, you see, if she knew that I was with Mr. Harcourt."

So Mr. Birch, who, while the novelty of the position lasted, rather enjoyed the unaccustomed duty of looking after his daughter, felt his mind at rest. Eliza was a "stickler." Eliza knew, he said to himself, and immediately proposed to his daughter that she should invite Harcourt to ride with them that morning, to be present at the coursing-match at Pond's End.

If Harcourt did not fall in love with Erica to a deeper depth than he had ever been in love in all his life before, Harcourt was a fool, he said to himself. But then Mr. Birch had quite contentedly made up his mind some time ago that this particular member of his company of "men" *was* a fool. A man who had nothing healthy about him, either in appearance or pursuit; who paced his bedroom for exercise, instead of getting out into the wholesome air; who sat neck and heels together over books that no other man could read; who passed hours of the day and night spoiling reams of paper and wasting rivers of ink, scribbling down the Lord knew what, and which no mortal eye but Harcourt's own was ever allowed to see—a man who couldn't

shoot; who rode without enjoyment; who couldn't tell a hare from a rabbit, a decent horse from a screw; who had nothing to say when the rival merits of brown, blue, and pink cartridges were under discussion; who was dumb on the mighty subject of "E. C." powder; who was, in short, the very poorest thing in the shape of a companion that Dicky Birch had ever had to get along with.

Harcourt might fall in love with his girl, and be hanged to him; but there wasn't much fear, he assured himself, for his sensible, bright Erica there!

During that day the little party of young people, whom Birch delighted to have about him at that season of the year, assembled at Flint Hall. In the evening, when Erica, dressed for dinner, came running down, a little late and prettily breathless, into the library, she found a noisy group about her father, lying back laughing in his chair. She found Harcourt scowling over a book in a lonely corner of the room. She found, standing up in his favourite position, with his back to the fire—Hugh Barty.

He relinquished the careful contemplation of his finger-nails as the door opened, and looked at Erica in her dress of soft red silk, standing, in her surprise at the sight of him, motionless in the doorway. Four hours ago she had said good-bye to him, and had

watched him drive off on his way to the station and his Christmas in town.

He gave a short laugh as he caught the expression of her face.

"I had to come back," he said ruefully. "They had altered the confounded train. I missed it by five minutes. There was nothing for it but to come back."

Erica laughed happily, and came forward in her flame-coloured dress to the firelight.

"It is fate!" she said.

CHAPTER V.

"I MUST HAVE LIBERTY WITHAL."

ALTHOUGH deeply and resentfully conscious of being put out of his element, of being bored and victimized and generally made a fool of throughout the noisy festivity of Yuletide as celebrated at Flint Hall, in looking back upon that period—as circumstances later on compelled him rather persistently to do—Barty was fain to acknowledge that the whole affair had not been so bad as he had expected. He found, indeed, as the time receded, that his thoughts of that especial Christmas-time grew kinder and kinder, till the day came when he had to admit to himself that he must have been exceedingly happy without knowing it.

He, however, certainly found the long dinner of that evening an intolerable bore. He was, in truth, odd as the fact came to seem to him afterwards, honestly disgusted at having failed to escape from the place and its inroad of uncongenial company; savage at the frustration of his plan for getting over the inevitable nuisance of the holiday in his own rational fashion. He was entirely out of his element amid this crew of exuberantly

joyous young visitors—all of them of an irresponsible age and condition; all of them having apparently spent their Christmases at Flint Hall since babyhood; all of them holding traditions of ceremonials from which they were resolved not to depart.

One of these appeared to be that "Uncle Dicky" must make a speech, which feat that gentleman performed readily enough in a very happy, easy fashion, he having been a practised hand at such work in days past and gone. Another was that Uncle Dicky's health must be drunk standing, and with musical honours. Another, that Uncle Dicky should sing—as he always had done, whether he liked it or not—"We'll all go a-hunting to-day," his visitors undertaking to assist him with the chorus.

Now, Birch's voice had been, once on a time, a sweet one, and he had been said to sing a good song. But age, which had treated him kindly in some respects, had certainly by no means improved his vocal powers. Barty, leaning back in his chair, gravely pulling at his moustache, was conscious of a vexed inclination to laugh, as his old friend's voice broke and quavered and squeaked.

One of the young ones, with a greater knowledge of music than he, and with feelings less under control, did break into an audible titter.

The handsome old man, standing upright, his fingers in his waistcoat pockets, his eyes cast ceiling-ward,

warbled on, happily unconscious; but Barty, glancing at her beneath lowered lids, saw that Erica's cheeks had flushed, and that her eyes were full of tears.

"After all, this wonderful daughter, about whom he brags so interminably, does care for poor old Dicky," Barty said to himself.

And because he was himself a man capable of loving his friend, Barty liked the girl for that little display of emotion.

After dinner it was announced that there was to be dancing. "We must dance, because we have always danced," they said—the worst of all reasons that they should commit the folly again, as was pointed out to the youthful enthusiasts by the one sober person present.

But dance they would. Dance he must. Oh yes—really. With his co-operation there would be just enough for a double set of Lancers. They had always danced the Lancers. The Lancers were such fun, because no one ever knew them.

Barty was not a dancing man. He stood about uncomfortably by the fire, looking at it with a wary eye as the flying skirts fanned it into flame. He retreated to the window, which, because of the dust from the carpet and the heat of the room, it was soon found necessary to open. He found himself behind pieces of displaced furniture, pushed into remote corners—edging always nearer toward the door.

At last he escaped.

With a great sigh of relief he crossed the hall—very bright and pretty in its garlands of ivy and holly, the light from the shaded lamps warming the cold stone of archways and walls. He knew where he could take refuge, where, even on such a night of shameless invasion of privacy, he would be unmolested.

There was a certain little room arrived at by a passage leading toward the kitchen, where, at the close of pleasanter days, muddy boots were kicked off tired feet, where cartridges were unloaded and guns thrown down, where, standing before the fire in stockinged feet, the day's bag was counted up, the due apportionment made of game to every gun—a room likely to appear pleasant only in the eyes of sportsmen, being generally dusty and untidy, redolent of stale tobacco, old boots, and oil. To it Barty's thoughts had flown this evening, as to a haven of refuge. Harcourt was busy at the piano, playing his confounded waltzes; the master of the house—the old fool!—was capering about, dancing with his own daughter; no one else was likely to come there, and Barty could smoke a pipe and be in peace.

He gave a sigh of delighted anticipation as he opened the door. There was no other light but the light of the fire there. Someone who was kneeling on the hearthrug rose up quickly as he went in, and would

have brushed past him, but that Barty, his hand on her arm, stopped her.

It was Penelope, the beautiful palourmaid, for whom all the men in that bachelor establishment had a kind word or a joke.

"And what might you be doing here, Penelope, in regions sacred from your sex?" Barty asked her, holding her with a strong hand before him when she would have twisted away.

"I was making up the fire, sir. I thought some of you gentlemen might be coming in."

"You look much more in a condition to put out the fire," Barty said, peering into the girl's face. "To go down on your knees and cry into it isn't the most successful plan to encourage a flame. What is the matter, Penny?"

Barty's voice could be very kind, as several among the weak and unfortunate of his acquaintance knew, and Penny put up her lace-adorned apron to her quivering lips and began to cry again.

"It's the music, sir," she said, "that make me feel so low. I come here to get away from the sound of it."

"It makes me 'low,' too—uncommonly," Barty said; "but it takes more than Mr. Harcourt's most deeply wailing waltzes to make me cry. You've been quarrel-

ling with your sweetheart, Penny. Come, what has Mr. Shadrach Bush been saying to you?"

Penelope dropped her apron and looked up, indignantly pretty, through her tears.

"Shady Bush!" she cried. "As if I should belittle myself paying regards to anything Shady Bush had to say to me, Mr. Barty. Anyone that telled you Shady Bush was anything to me telled you a lie, sir, and——"

A light step sounded in the passage. Finishing with a sob of indignation, Penelope twisted herself free from Barty's restraining hand and rushed from the room, drawing back hastily in the doorway to prevent herself knocking against the person coming in.

Barty, who had subsided into the fireside chair, his hand upon his pipe, had to rise to his feet again and fling his unfailing consoler angrily from him; for here—confound her!—was Birch's daughter bursting in upon him—"at him" again, as he mentally put it.

She was a very fair interruption to the rosiest dream, it might have been said for her—a vision of white flesh and rose-red draperies; of luxuriant hair, loosed by the dance into enchanting waves and ripples about the gracious head; of sweetest eyes, radiant with goodwill and frank enjoyment. Old Dicky might well be proud of his daughter to-night! Even Barty allowed grudgingly, in the midst of his annoyance, that "Birch's daughter" was certainly looking uncommonly well.

"Oh, won't you come?" she asked him, standing still, shyly, in the doorway and persuasively smiling upon him: the "invitation to the waltz" done into beautiful flesh and blood.

She was certainly fair enough to have lured a man to worse things than the dance, but Barty had been—and prided himself on having been—deaf to the charming voices of fairer women than she.

"I was thinking of having a pipe first, if you will excuse me, Miss Birch," he said, brutally indifferent.

"Then may I come in and sit down a minute? Do you mind?" she asked him, smiling upon him with no fear of the possibility of an objection to her presence. "You may smoke all the same, you know."

Barty stretched out his hand to his discarded pipe with the angry impulse to take her at her word. Since the woman forgot her place, why should he remember it? However, he got no farther than to take the empty pipe in his hand, holding it there, an elegant protest against her presence. He pushed a chair forward for her, but he would not be gracious enough himself to sit down, standing up stiff and unsmiling by the back of the comfortable seat from which he had arisen.

"I am so sorry if we have put you out," she said, looking up at him. "All the time that I have been dancing, do you know—and Mr. Harcourt plays dance music divinely; we've had some lovely waltzes—all the

time you've been weighing heavily on my spirits. I had a presentiment that I should find you shut up in this horrid little room—and so I came. I can't bear to think of anyone being lonely and—and sad to-night."

"It is very good of you," Barty said, stiff and ungracious; "but I am self-satisfied enough to find myself tolerably good company at all times. And I really do not feel, I assure you, anything approaching to the sadness I should experience if compelled to 'join the dance.'"

The corners of Erica's mouth drooped a little. Lying back in her chair, she looked up at him, and the kindly light in her eyes gave way to the light of derision.

"And do you disapprove of dancing, then—on moral or religious grounds, I mean?" she asked him, her tone grown very deep and solemn.

"Good heavens! I?"

"Tell me. I wish so much to know. Or is it only that you don't dare because you can't dance, perhaps?"

"Won't you leave me another alternative? Have you not heard of men declining to do things because they have not wished to do them, Miss Birch?"

"Oh yes," Erica admitted, turning her eyes from him to the fire. "But, then, they have generally been things which they don't do very well, I think."

A suspicion of venom crept into Barty's tone of aloofness.

"I won't venture to contradict you," he said. "Your powers of observation are doubtless great, your interest in your subject keen, and your opportunities for the study of my sex evidently unlimited. Our chief characteristic, the moving-spring of our every action, is doubtless, as you suggest, the love of display."

"Yes. What else is it?" she asked him calmly, settling her head upon the back of her chair that she might the better look up at him. "What do you all live and work and give your time and your money and your energy for, but to do one particular useless thing better than other people? You, for instance. You are a good shot, I believe—I've heard my father say so. You ride pretty straight to hounds. What do you do it for? You aren't really anxious to be 'in at the death' in order to see a poor, wretched, hunted little creature torn to pieces by the dogs, are you? When you come home and make your big claim for your gun over the fire, it isn't the thought that, thanks to you, so many less harmless and beautiful things are left in the world—it isn't surely that consideration which gives you pleasure, is it? I suppose it is the reflection that in those two grand instances you excel other men which is so comforting."

"Your attention is very flattering, Miss Birch; but

you cannot generalize from one person. My own ignoble aim is to figure as a crack shot and rider—it is that, because you say so. But there are among us men of higher ambition—men like your great ally, Mr. Lucian Harcourt, for instance—who take pleasure in the death of things for nobler ends than to gratify their own vanity.”

“Oh, Mr. Harcourt!” Erica repeated indifferently. She did not want to talk to Hugh Barty about Mr. Harcourt.

“Harcourt, you know, has a theory which he is perfecting for the benefit of mankind. He may fail in doing that exactly. Never mind. ‘Not failure, but low aim, is crime,’ you remember, Miss Birch. I can’t explain this theory. It has something to do with nerve-centres, I believe, and when it has been properly worked out and put into practice and adopted throughout the world, there is, I am told, to be no more pain. Meanwhile it is rough on the rabbit, or the rat, or the mongrel dog which spends its last moments in the service of humanity up in our dear friend Lucian’s mysterious study.”

Erica had thrown up her hands to her ears with the familiar gesture. She dropped them as Barty finished, not having lost a word of what he had said.

“And what has that to do with what I was saying?” she asked; and Barty was silent, for the reason, perhaps,

that he did not know. "Mr. Harcourt is an enthusiast in his profession, or his father's profession—that is easy to be seen—and exceedingly praiseworthy, exceedingly—don't you think so? I said *useless* things. I was speaking of the people who devote their lives to excelling in their own especial amusement, and who think it a grand and consistent thing to condemn the amusements of other people."

"That does not apply to me, then," Barty said; "for I am consistent in this, that I condemn nothing. So long as people will allow me to go my own way unmolested, which is all I ask, I promise them that, for all me, they also shall go theirs."

"But you are unsatisfactory, Mr. Barty; and why should you, more than the rest of the world, be left to your own devices?"

"It seems to me very little to ask, although so frequently I ask in vain."

"You may ask it, of course, but you *can't* expect to get it. Now, if you don't work, why don't you play? I should, of course, prefer you to work; but, failing that, you certainly ought to do the other thing."

"It is very good of you, as I said, to take such a flattering interest. As you appear to wish to discuss the subject, would you inform me what you would wish to have me work at?"

"At anything," Erica declared promptly, lying lazily

back in her chair, the soft round arms that had been happily and consistently idle for the twenty-three years of her life loosely stretched before her. The flame of the fire shone fitfully upon the whiteness of those beautiful, useless arms, and on the long draperies of her dress, richly shaded or leaping into rosy light where the firelight fell upon them. "What would I care, if I were a man, so that only I had leave to work.

"Get leave to work.
In this world 'tis the best you get
At all."

"Oh yes," he said, and glanced at the idle, delicate hands upon her lap; "I know. Women are always brave with other people's skins, and tremendously devoted to labour with any hands but their own."

Then he grew weary of his dignified demeanour, and sat himself down in his chair, and flung the pipe he had held in his hand upon the littered table beside him. Since the woman would not leave him in peace, since the solitude he craved could not be his, it was as well to make the best of the position. He leant forward in his chair and looked at her critically with his cold blue eyes.

"So you are an apostle of work!" he said. "Well, I don't accept your gospel. There's a lot of clap-trap talked nowadays, Miss Birch, about the sacredness of

work—you've heard it, of course. It's easy enough to learn the jargon. I could reel it off for you by the hour myself. Now, the world is full of workers. The real helpers of humanity, mind you, are the men who don't work, but get their things done for them."

"Oh, Mr. Barty! Think of the wasted talents! How terrible on one's death-bed to reflect, 'I have done nothing. In nothing is the world better for my having lived—not by the breaking of a single chain, not by the lifting of one of her lightest burdens!'"

"Oh, the beasts of burden are innumerable. I, for one, am not vain enough to be troubled with the thought of wasted talents; and as for the rest, on my death-bed I make no doubt I shall have plenty of regrets—enough to occupy my mind. I shall endeavour to keep it clear of a medley of silliness and sentiment."

"Doubtless you will be successful," she said, with a suspicion of light displeasure on her lip. "I should not doubt your power of commanding the proper emotions even in the supreme moment. And—and however others may regard your life when it is over, you yourself—*wherever* you are—will be filled, I am sure, with a beautiful satisfaction."

"Probably. If I have done not much good, I shan't, at any rate, have done much harm. How many of your zealous, enthusiastic souls can say as much? No. Be-

lieve me, your inert fool is to be preferred to your energetic fool—he is safer.”

She looked at him in silence for a moment, slowly considering the strong-looking, high-coloured face. Deep lines had cut themselves about the mouth, continuing the downward sweep of the sandy moustache; lesser lines were stamped at the corners of the eyes, and showed—horizontal and perpendicular—upon his forehead. There was not a line of foolishness or of feebleness among them, Erica, with her profound knowledge of physiognomy, decided.

“You, who are so superior, should be above an affectation,” she said, dropping her voice to that tone whose seductiveness so alarmed him. “You can’t honestly *think* yourself a fool.”

“*Think!*” he repeated, and got upon his feet again with an impatience of himself, of her, of fate—she did not know which. “I gave up thinking about myself years ago, I thank God, or I should have gone mad—or only idiotic, perhaps; I don’t want to seem too arrogant. Now I hear the ravishing strains of Harcourt’s waltzes. Won’t you let me restore you to the giddy delights of the dance?”

CHAPTER VI.

"WE'LL KEEP OUR CHRISTMAS MERRY STILL."

IN Dicky Birch's happy-go-lucky establishment church-going was pursued with a singular regularity. That is to say, the Flint Hall pew was always tenanted once during the year, and was always empty at other times.

Surely as the Christmas festival came round would Birch, on that single annual occasion, cross the little park and the frozen or sloppy meadow paths forming the short-cut to the church, in the company of his daughter, and in a frame of mind enviably devout.

He did not mention to her, that he had not approached the sacred edifice since last he escorted her thither; it is to be doubted if he even remembered the fact.

He was always deeply impressed by the service—trolling out the hymns with independent quavers of his own, and a tear in his eye. He listened, docile and uncritical, to the sermon, his bright blue eyes wandering from the twisted evergreens about the pillars and the jewelled lights in the grand east window to his daughter's face, very lovable and fair and round in her

dark furs. Dicky's eyes would linger there with paternal satisfaction.

The recollection of other Christmas Days came to him—of days when her mother had sat in Erica's seat looking as young and fair as she. Dicky was not without sentiment, nor at all backward in pouring out a history of his wrong and of her unfaithfulness into convenient ears whenever the subject of his wife came uppermost in his thoughts—anyone was welcome to his confidence—yet did he ever wisely refrain from private meditation on the subject. Soon would he shift his position in his pew, and with it the subject of his thoughts, and would show a face as cheery as ever to greet his few neighbours when that year's public devotions were over.

On this especial 25th of December, the unaccustomed presence of two of the Flint Hall "men" rejoiced the heart of the parson of Grainge, who, to the extempore discourse he had contemplated for the day, thought fit to add a fulmination against those hardened, unregenerate sinners who, given up to the pleasures of the world, the flesh, and the devil, refrained their feet from treading in the paths of righteousness, or, at least, from bending them toward the house of God.

"Get into a pleasant train of thought, or contrive to keep your mind a perfect blank—an easier feat with some of us—and even the eloquence of the Rector of

Grainge is to be borne," Hugh Barty had said coming along, when one of them had grumbled at the prospect of the half-hour's sermon.

Erica Birch, looking at the man as he sat at the opposite end of the pew, wondered more than a little if he had been successful in the attainment of either of those desirable mental attitudes. He sat with his arms folded across him, his chin upon his chest, his eyes fixed moodily upon the prayer and hymn books on the ledge in front of him. Erica was interested in this sullen, self-retired man of the big frame and the sandy hair and moustache—the friend of whom her father was both fond and proud. She decided that it was not disgust at the vulgarity of the Rector's sermon, nor resentment at the personalities freely levelled at his own head, which had brought that pucker to Barty's forehead, and set his lips so gloomily beneath his moustache.

Wistfully regarding him from her corner, secure in the certainty that he was unflatteringly oblivious of her presence, and would not lift his eyes to her face, Erica started on a train of thought which, if not "pleasant" exactly, was engrossing to the exclusion of the remarks going on overhead.

His life must be horribly unsatisfactory, she decided. With such good abilities, mentally and physically of such splendid health, he must regret the fact—no matter

what he alleged to the contrary—that he had no career before him. How could he be content to look forward to such an aimless, empty existence! What a pity was the possession of even that small fortune, which appeared to him so beggarly! With nothing to fall back upon, of dire necessity he must have worked. And Erica, who did nothing from morning till night, and who never found the hours too long for her, was always quite convinced that it was very terrible for other people to be idle.

Barty had spoken lightly enough of his brother's marriage and its consequences to him, but Erica knew that his disappointment had not been light. Long ago she had been told the outlines of a story relating to him; since knowing him, she—thanks to a deep interest and a lively imagination—had filled in the sketch.

He had been engaged to—or on the point of being engaged to—a lady who, on the news of his brother's marriage, had thrown him over, and married a man whose fortune was already assured. Instead of hating this woman who had played him such a scurvy trick—as Erica, of course, decided she should be hated—the report ran that Barty was in love with her still.

Erica knew that at the different houses where he stayed he met her. She guessed that this false and beautiful creature was to have been one of the guests at Bigby this Christmas.

Once, not very long ago, this worthless object of Hugh Barty's wasted affection had been pointed out to Erica. She had stood close to Lady Dalling for a time on the crowded staircase of the Lyceum Theatre. As Erica looked across now at the moody face at the far end of the pew, at the knit brow and down-looking eyes, at the lines cut deep at the corners of the mouth, she saw again a vision of plush and gold and jewels, of a lightly-carried head, of black-lidded blue eyes, that wandered restlessly from group to group. Instead of the quite alarming denunciations of the good clergyman above her head, a laughing voice was in Erica's ears. She shut her eyes, and the very odour which had lain among the woman's beautiful raiment assailed her nostrils again.

Her heart grew sore and heavy with a woman's pity for her father's friend—a woman's envy of the charm which had been powerful to the winning of such a foolishly faithful love from such a sensible and unimpressionable man.

"Oh, the love that is wasted in the world!" From that text Erica preached a little sentimental sermon to herself, independent of the sermon going on above. And this latter discourse was ended; and, a friendly admonitory kick being administered to him by Dicky, Barty aroused himself from his meditations, arrested an inclination to yawn and to stretch himself, and bowed

his head for the blessing. And the organ burst forth in triumphant strains; and the public devotions of the master of Flint Hall were concluded for another year.

"How magnificent that last voluntary was, Mr. Harcourt!" Erica said to the young man, who was pleased sometimes to usurp the place of the regular organist in the loft. Miss Birch and one or two more of the party had waited by the porch to hear the finish of that burst of triumphant sound.

"Did you like it?" Harcourt asked her eagerly. "Yes, I meant to play that 'Hallelujah Chorus' as I had never played it before. I played it for you."

"Birch, I'll tell you what I was thinking of in church," Barty was saying. "Why shouldn't we have a try at the partridges to-morrow? I'd send over to Bigby for Bill's kite, and get him to send one of his fellows with it. Then, if we get a bit of a wind—and the sky looks like it—if we didn't have many shots, 'twould be sport for some of the youngsters, and"—with a deep sigh and an enormous sense of unwonted magnanimity—"the ladies might like to see it too."

But before anything so rational as partridge-shooting could be indulged in, many seasonable trials had to be gone through. Among these was a ridiculous expedition to the big pond on the Rushmere Farm for the alleged purpose of discovering if it would "be likely to bear"—a contingency highly improbable, seeing that the smaller

watery places, the ponds and puddles of home, were not in a condition, as Barty did not fail to point out, to support the weight of a pussy-cat.

This undesirable, common-sense view of the matter did by no means chill the ardour with which the expedition was undertaken; and the walk was a pleasant walk, in spite of the frost-wind in their teeth. It had not been undertaken until the short afternoon was well advanced, and the quick-coming darkness was upon them before they reached their destination, and saw the stars shining down upon the thin blue ice of the big Rushmere pond.

They had started in a tolerably compact body, but they came back in straggling couples. Barty was well pleased with his companion, a pretty child of fifteen or thereabout, with a tangled mop of hanging hair and shining red-brown eyes, who had taken a great liking to him, or, rather, to his dog, and who prattled easily to him, walking homeward, one hand upon his arm, the other carrying his stick—as was her fashion of walking with her father, she told him—while Nipper, the white fox-terrier, ran on before.

It was indignation on this pretty child’s account which encouraged Barty, an hour later, to make himself actively unpleasant to a certain young man of the party, of whom he had been silently contemptuous only before—a youth with a curling moustache and an eyeglass

—a youth whose nose you might admire in profile, though you'd miss his chin—a “cheaply-organized, self-saturated youth.”

“Do you know what that horrid Alfie is going to do?” Barty's new little friend asked of him, voluble and confiding in the starlight. “He always does it, Molly says. Molly is my sister; she always has come to Uncle Dicky for Christmas, but this is my first year. He is going to kiss every girl in the house! Oh, he will do it. It's not a bit of good trying to stop him, Molly says. And we know he's got the mistletoe all ready, because Molly peeped in, and there it was on his dressing-table. He'll wait till we come out of our rooms for dinner, and then you simply *can't* escape. Alfie was in love with Molly last year, so she didn't mind so much; but now he's in love with my cousin Eric, and, of course, Molly doesn't want to kiss him—*now!*”

Barty laughed.

“But Miss Birch, I suppose, is ready to welcome his attentions? Well, what shall you do, Audrey?”

“I can get from my room to Eric's. I shall go to Eric to protect me. Wouldn't you? You see, it's all very well for Molly. She's eighteen, and has been to two balls, and six ‘at homes,’ and a dinner-party; but no one—only my father and Teddy—that's my brother, you know—has ever kissed me, and I don't want that horrid Alfie to be the one to begin.”

The consequence of which conversation was that, when he issued from his room an hour or two later, and knocked against the complacent Alfy loitering on the stairs, one hand daintily extending the tips of his moustache, the other concealed beneath his coat-tails, Barty bethought him of his little companion of the homeward walk, and, laying his hand within the crooked elbow of the youth, compelled him to descend by his side. He did not condescend to consider Alfy's feelings in the matter, nor to feign unconsciousness of his designs.

"There are girls in the house too young for such rubbish," he said; "and if they don't object, and if Birch don't object, I do; and I'll see you at the devil before I'll sanction such tomfoolery."

He incurred the hapless Alfy's undying hatred by that procedure, which was really performed in an unnecessarily brutal way; and it is doubtful if the action met with the gratitude it merited from the rescued ladies.

"They say if you had wanted to kiss them yourself it would have been different," his little friend Audrey informed him the next morning, having constituted herself his companion and Nipper's on their lounging rounds. "They say that kind of prudery is absurd at Christmas-time. And, oh! do you know what they call you now? They call you 'the dog in the manger.'"

Whereat Barty had contemptuously snorted, rubbing with his stick the pink, scaly back of the pig he was contemplating, leaning with Audrey over the railings of the sty.

Curiously, in the light of after-events, Barty recalled the hour which, in accordance with the laws of King Custom, Birch and his daughter and their guests spent in the big kitchen of Flint Hall.

There was much shouting and laughter over the dish of snap-dragons which Penelope, a sheet about her to heighten the ghostly effect, was made to introduce. Barty noticed how the fair face of the girl in that blue, fitful light had looked like the face of a spirit from another world—as sad and forlorn, it seemed to him, looking back, as that of a spirit who was lost.

Even Barty, sorely reluctant, was made to join in that uproarious game of blindman's-buff which followed. For Audrey, having speedily arranged to be caught, and, regardless of every other claim on her attention, having noted where, in the recess of a half-opened cupboard door, he stood, had made a dead set at him, hunted him through the door, and triumphantly captured him among the pots and pans of the cook's closet.

Caught, he had perforce submitted, and with a fair grace had stooped his tall head to have the handkerchief adjusted about his thinning locks by the child's delighted fingers. Loosed, he created screams of terror

from the home party and roars of laughter from the servants. Wheeling about with wide-extended arms and an enormous stride, and withal a grim silence and a kind of deadly earnestness of demeanour, he was a blindman from whom the boldest recoiled.

They fled from him to the remotest corners, took refuge in pantries, hid behind doors, mounted on chairs and tables, climbed the dresser. The poker and tongs, the rolling-pin, a bag of feathers, a "poke" of flour were offered for his embrace.

Waxing desperate, and grown uncomfortably giddy, he pursued through a doorway a figure which he heard dance before him, and whose light, joyous laughter he recognised. Hunted into a corner, suddenly, with a cry and a scuffle, this figure appeared to be projected into his arms.

Tightly he grasped her—involuntarily in his giddiness attempting to steady himself against her—called her name "Audrey," tore the bandage from his eyes—to find that it was Audrey's cousin Erica whom he was almost frantically clutching to his breast.

"I got behind Eric, who was hiding in the corner, and *threw* her at you!" Audrey delightedly explained; "Eric wasn't even playing—she was so afraid you should catch her. She was horribly afraid. Look how white Eric is!"

"I really beg a thousand pardons," was all Barty

could say. He had put out a hand and clutched at the banisters to steady himself; he was panting for breath; his eyes were dazed by the sudden light; the scanty yellow hair was ruffled upon his forehead. Erica smiled with ready good-nature, making light of his apology. It seemed to his dazzled vision that her face really was unusually pale. "It is a ridiculous position to put sane people into," he said, laughing, but annoyed and uncomfortable. "It is a pastime fitted only for children and lunatics."

He caught at Audrey then and bound the bandage about her eyes.

"Go, child, and catch pretty cousin Alfy," he said.

As for Lucian Harcourt, he also had a soul above the trivialities of the season. He looked on, silent and melancholy, holding himself aloof from participation in the fun of the moment, but never very far from Erica Birch's side. They had one great bond in common, these two—their love of music. She never tired of listening to his interpretation of the great masters or to his own wild but really clever improvisation. While he, if he could sit and fix his great brilliant eyes upon Erica's face while he played, or if he could hear his own voice rising with hers in song, seemed content.

He would begin to talk to her through the music, but in time his hands would drop from the notes, and Erica would be treated to an unaccompanied recital of

his wrongs and ill-treatment at the hand of Fate and of the world. He had a vivid memory for every slight which had been put upon him—or, as Erica sometimes fancied, a vivid imagination to create them—and he never spared himself or her a detail. While Erica—beginning to feel in spite of herself a little secret contempt for the man who could be so little and so unmanly—because of his faith in her, and his evident delight in her society, would not let him see that she was sometimes a thought disgusted, and oftentimes more than a thought wearied by his confidences; but, woman-like, loath to relinquish the dominion she had gained, smiled on, showing him the same gentle sympathy, administering, when she could, encouragement and consolation.

"What humbugs you women are!" Barty said to her suddenly one day. That was when the Christmas festivities were over, and the house rid of its guests. "I know that miserable little man must bore you to death. I know, because there was a time when I was the recipient of the long catalogue of his woes. Heaven knows what made him imagine that I should be sympathetic! I had, however, to destroy the illusion. I had to choose between being brutal to him and perishing of weariness."

"I am sure that you did not hesitate."

"It is pleasant to find that you have faith in my astuteness."

"Poor Mr. Harcourt is a little morbid, perhaps," she admitted. "He talks a great deal. I do not always quite make out what he means."

Barty shrugged his shoulders contemptuously.

"The man is a sickening ass," he said—"a cross between a vain woman and a spiteful child. It's small wonder he seeks the society of women. No man worthy the name could stand half an hour of him."

"And women are so vain and spiteful themselves, I suppose, and such fools beside, that——"

"Women have patience with that kind of miserable mental cripple. A patience born of compassion, perhaps—or born of the inability of the sex to distinguish between the pitiable and the contemptible."

"You have a very low opinion of women, Mr. Barty."

"Have I?" Barty asked stolidly, neither assenting nor denying the impeachment.

"Being a woman, you will think me incapable of judging; but it has not occurred to me that Mr. Harcourt is *mentally* deficient. He even seems to me to be—intellectually—about the equal of—well, of the other men one meets. When he gets away from himself his talk is sometimes very clever talk; and as a musician——"

But Barty had had enough of the subject.

"Oh, Harcourt's well enough, I dare say," he said indifferently, "to anyone who can stand him. A harmless, crack-brained fellow enough."

When this conversation took place he had been upon the point of starting to ride over to Bigby Court to inquire after his little nephew. He passed out of the room as he spoke, and Erica, upon whose idle hands time hung somewhat heavily now, followed him slowly, and stood within the hall-door to see him mount.

"I so hope that you may find the dear little boy better," she said. "I should like to send the poor mite my love. I have not seen him, but it could do no harm, could it?"

That it could do his nephew any good Barty was not courtier enough to avow.

Despite the lamented poverty of his purse, he rode a handsome horse: it had to be an expensive one to carry his weight; he himself appeared to advantage upon horseback.

The window above the door was that of Harcourt's private room. He had thrown it open as the horse was led round, and now leaned out to look down enviously upon the splendidly-matched couple—man and horse—beneath him. He heard the clear ring of Erica's voice, and his fingers, which dragged the curtain back from the pane, worked nervously in the material, and the brilliant eyes, burning with jealousy and hatred, looked

down upon the big man, who was bending to adjust the spur over his lifted heel.

As he straightened himself in the saddle Barty recurred, as if without any break in the train of thought, to the subject which he and Miss Birch had been discussing. He recurred to it with a laugh and a shrug of his shoulders, settling his hat upon his head.

"The father is a specialist on brain-mischief, you know," he said. "I think it probable myself that he married one of his own patients."

He lifted his hat and rode leisurely off then.

And the man above, listening with a face grown white, clutched spasmodically at the curtain till he tore it from its rings; then, casting it from him, flung himself, sobbing, face downward upon the floor.

CHAPTER VII.

"COMMON AS LIGHT IS LOVE."

HUGH BARTY did not return to Flint Hall that night. Instead, he sent over a messenger for his portmanteau, bearing a brief note which explained that he had found them all in great trouble at Bigby, and had decided to remain there for a few days.

He stayed for ten, and when at the expiration of that term he returned, he came, if not a different man, a man of different prospects, having left Hughie, the little heir who had come between Barty and his not very remote chance of inheriting his sickly half-brother's estates, in his grave.

Erica at that time was still at Flint Hall, but there was a talk of her early departure. Those especially wealthy and impressionable young men whom Birch was honestly afraid of subjecting to the fascination of his daughter's presence would be coming back soon, and that would be the signal. Eric must go then. "His bird must fly," Dicky said sorrowfully, patting his daughter's hand.

It was not so lively at Flint Hall as at "auntie's,"

yet Erica was not anxious to repair to Granville Gardens. The perfect freedom and unrestraint were welcome. She took an interest in the horses and dogs, even, after a time, in the pigs which usurped so much of Hugh Barty's attention. She found it pleasant, too, to pet and humour her father; and having had her share of admiration of a more dangerous sort, she was charmed with the paternal kind.

Perhaps, too—as a woman is said never to be sated with flattery, but to relish the sweet unwholesome draught from any hand—Miss Birch may have found even Lucian Harcourt's passionate and increasing admiration agreeable to her.

If this were so, she kept the fact to herself. To her father she did not speak of Harcourt, but in her rides and drives and walks with Mr. Birch she did talk very often of Hugh Barty, and contrived to make her father talk of him.

"He interests me, daddy," she explained quite frankly. "It is because you like him so much, and because I don't quite make him out. I know no more the manner of man he is, *really*, than before I came. You know, those people whom one sees over at a glance—like empty rooms—they don't interest one greatly. Perhaps the other sort don't when you know them—when you've looked behind curtains, and peeped over screens, and explored hidden nooks, there may be, after

all—nothing. But one likes the excitement, and there is always the chance. When I quite understand Mr. Barty I shall be tired of him, I expect; but——"

But at present she was baffled and interested.

She looked at him with curiosity blended with her sympathy when he returned—life and its prospects changed for him—from his sad visit. How would he bear himself? What would he say? How would he look?

Decidedly he was a disappointing man for a sentimental situation. Except that for the first quarter of an hour of his return he wore a suit of mourning, of which he then hastened to divest himself, there was not a sign about him of the good and evil which had befallen him. When Erica, bent on making him give expression to some of the sorrow he should have felt, would speak to him of the little dead nephew, he replied to her remarks readily enough, evincing neither the reserve of deep feeling nor the gush of deep interest in the subject. But he warmed up considerably in relating to Birch how at last he had carried his point in the matter of a new plantation which he and the head-keeper had always held to be desirable on a certain otherwise useless spot of ground on the Bigby estate. He had ordered, with his brother's consent, so many thousand young firs for this on the day before.

Erica, disgusted and disappointed, turned a meta-

phorical back upon the man who could be so callous over the suffering and death of a little child. And she welcomed Harcourt to her side more warmly—Harcourt, who surely did not offend on the score of possessing too little feeling; Harcourt, of the sonatas, the funeral marches, the wailing waltzes; Harcourt, of the brilliant, passionately adoring eyes and the musical voice, and the dramatic gesture, and the unhesitating flow of words.

But it happened on a day when Barty had been back for a week, and when Erica's departure was fixed only a day or so ahead—it happened that a visitor appeared at Flint Hall who had never entered that somewhat rackety bachelor abode before.

This was none other than Lady Barty, the mother of that poor little victim whom measles had cleared out of his cruel uncle's path. Barty was out when his brother's wife called, and so missed seeing that faded, sad lady of middle age and ruined hopes whom "Bill had married," as Hugh had said to himself many times, "the Lord alone knew why."

He was away, and therefore Lady Barty, in the pauses of the details of her little boy's illness and death, which she gave to Erica with painful minuteness and almost dry-eyed, could speak of him. She talked of the comfort that "Hugh" had been to them, of his patience and gentleness and strength; of how the child had clung to him, and watched him about the room,

and would take his nourishment and his medicine, while he could take them at all, only from "Uncle Hugh's" hand.

"He was always my darling's hero," the mother said. "And day and night, while he lasted, my boy would keep him by his bed; and Hugh was so good—Hugh never tired.

"And, Miss Birch, he told my darling that you had sent your love. And my darling—some things went out of his mind, but that stayed—twice told me to take his love to the lady Uncle Hugh knew, who had thought of him.

"He was so young he could not leave me much to do; but that was one of his commissions—and I've come. And as you have never seen him, I have brought you a photograph of my darling. You will keep it? And you will remember that my little Hughie sent his love?"

Erica took the picture silently, and looked at the representation of the pretty, delicate child through blinding tears, which the mother, dry-eyed herself, saw and envied, perhaps, and for which, when she was leaving, she lifted her face and left a kiss upon Miss Birch's pale round cheek.

After that visit Erica found herself looking with different eyes upon Barty.

As he sat, happily unconscious of her scrutiny,

silent over his newspapers (he seemed to satisfy his craving for literature entirely through the medium of the daily and weekly press); as he talked to her father or listened, with no flattering show of interest, to Dicky's cheery conversation, holding himself with regard to herself and Harcourt with a kind of natural aloofness, as if the two were of a species with which his was not intended to mix, Erica remembered what she had heard. She tried to picture that strong, shapely hand of his, with the hand of the dying child clasped in it; tried to see what the harsh-looking face could have been like in Hughie's adoring eyes—how the rugged lines must have softened and the cold eyes grown tender, and the strength which women admired must have softened to the tenderness which women loved.

Poor Erica! For the future there was for her always the glorifying light of that death-bed shining as a sort of halo about Hugh Barty's sandy head.

It was a small thing to make an ordinary man into a hero about, perhaps; but then small things are bound to suffice with a woman, predestined to worship the particular man. With her the day of small things is eternal, and it is only in keeping with the everlasting fitness of things that the hero who dominates her should be small.

Barty, for his part, remained, as has been said, quite unconscious of the speculations anent him going

on in Erica's mind. He would have been in all probability quite unmoved by them if he had known. He was not a "lady's man," nor was he conscious of a desire to shine before any woman.

There had been the one woman in his life. When he thought about her—which was by no means so often nor with such tragic regrets as Erica supposed—he decided that there was only that one still, that there would be only she for ever. And this, not because of any conviction of his that she was the best or the most charming. He seemed faithful rather through the sluggishness than the intensity of his affections. That was the only woman he had ever taken the trouble to fall in love with. He had done it, it seemed to him, after an uncomfortably thorough fashion. A good deal of bother and unpleasantness had accrued to him therefrom. He never meant to run the risk of that kind of unprofitable disturbance of all his habits and ideas again.

About a half-dozen times in the year he met her, at his brother's house, and at one or two other places where it was an understood thing that if Lord Dalling's wife were to enjoy herself Hugh Barty must be invited.

To these meetings he looked forward, time going on, with less and less ardour; not noting the fact in his own mind—although it was one probably recorded

with sufficient bitterness in hers—having been faithful to his ideal because he lacked sufficient interest in the subject to change it.

As for Birch's daughter, he had grown accustomed to the presence of Erica at Flint Hall now. It had not made so much difference as he had imagined. He had forgotten his early terror lest she should be "at him," his early grudge against her for disturbing the easy ways of the place.

On one or two occasions he had ridden with Erica and her father, but, although the rides had been pleasant enough, he had not sought a repetition of them. Her tall, rounded figure looked to decided advantage in her habit, and being her father's daughter, Erica was bound to be a fair horsewoman. But Barty was not one likely to encourage women in following man's pursuits. He looked with a cold eye upon the "horsy" woman. In the hunting-field he would shun her as the very incarnation of all that was distasteful; to see her shoot or fence he had as little desire as to see her smoke or make speeches. Indeed, he was conscious of only one grand desire with regard to the sex, and that was that it should keep its place. And he had, in his own mind, set that place in obscure quarters of exceedingly narrow limits.

To do her justice, Erica had not offended his ideas of propriety in any of these matters. She had, it is

true, exhibited an occasional most feminine love of talking, and of making others talk. But, although it was sometimes a bore to be drawn into an argument with her, the girl had undoubted sense. She wasn't an empty-headed, frivolous fool—she *could* talk.

And she was pleasant to look upon. Of that also there was no doubt. Whatever a woman has or lacks, let her at least have good looks for a *raison d'être*. Barty was of opinion that the world would go on all the better with only half its number of women. Let the ugly ones be swept off its face, then allow the others to do their worst. He was sceptical, for his part, of the amount of mischief which would be wrought. A man who went to ruin for a woman would get there, the woman lacking, quick enough by some other road. And such a poor thing of a man as that—what did it matter?

Altogether, he heard of the approaching departure of Birch's daughter without the delight with which a month earlier he would have hailed the news.

"I have to apologize to you for having obtruded my frivolous presence upon the seriousness of your days," she said to him when he made some polite reference to her approaching departure.

He always received with unsmiling directness the kind of speech which showed a propensity on the part of

Birch's daughter to engage in "chaff." Too much trouble was involved in accepting that challenge.

For his part, he had found her presence no interruption, he replied with heavy gravity. His pursuits happened to be such that a lady could neither share in nor interfere with.

All that depended upon the taste of the lady, Erica declared, being piqued at the superiority of the tone. For instance, he could hardly expect a woman to stand for the best part of the morning to scratch the back of a pig; yet was there no particular skill nor science in the exercise which should put it beyond the power of woman to accomplish.

He had not said that he expected it, Barty declared. (He folded up the newspaper which she had interrupted him in perusing and flung it on to the nearest table as he did so.) As a matter of fact, he had not been conscious of the desire for female companionship while so employed.

"But as to your other occupations, now—shooting, hunting—why, do not women hunt, pray?"

"Confound them that they do!" he grunted.

"They shoot?"

He was lying back resignedly, his hands in his trousers pockets, the back of his head resting on the top of his chair, his eyes on the ceiling. At her remark he gave a snort, so fierce and indignant that Erica laughed.

"Geraldine Bradley shoots," he said. "Thank God, I don't know another woman whose menkind are such asses as to let her do it. Her husband ought to be kicked for it. He's got the best shooting in the neighbourhood, and he'll have it all to himself—and to Geraldine—pretty soon. I don't go out with them any more, for one."

"And will Geraldine and her husband, whoever they may be, be desolated on that account?"

"I neither know nor care. I know it's very unpleasant to me to give up some of the best days of the year because a man is so wife-ridden that he can't be free of his incubus for a day at a time."

"Can the incubus shoot?"

He snorted again, but less fiercely—a snort with a laugh in it.

"Shoot? She? She hits a thing or two, being put into all the best places, and everyone being infernally anxious to put down their own birds to her credit. Shoot! Why don't she sit at home and make tea and read the fashion books?"

"Are those two the occupations, your own being denied them, you would choose for a woman?"

"What is it to me what she does? The world's before her to choose from. I only ask her to leave one or two things, in which she is simply useless and a bore, alone."

Erica was silent, looking at him as he sat and gazed at the ceiling in the firelight. His contemptuous tone, his unimpressionability, his insensibility to the fact that a pretty girl was talking to him and condescending to show interest in him, piqued her in spite of herself. If it had not been for the account of little Hughie's death-bed, she might have hated the man. If it had not been for the recollection of that old love-story of his, she might have turned from his indifference with equal indifference of her own.

She thought of that same love-story now, and of the beautiful woman on the stairs of the Lyceum, and she wondered with a wonder of which she never tired what manner of man this cold, immovable creature was in that society.

Erica had stood by the window when she had come in, to catch the last of the afternoon light upon the book which she held in her hand. She crossed to the fireplace now, and, standing with one hand upon the mantel-board, looked down upon Barty in his chair. Her round pale cheeks had flushed a little, and her eyes were shining with the excitement of a sudden daring.

"You make such a point of your indifference," she said; "and it is mostly assumed—I know that—and you are not the very best actor in the world. You despise all women so much—I don't believe it; I don't believe in such *superior superiority*. In what are you better than

other men that you should be different from them? I am not deceived—not for one moment. I can guess at the manner of man you are, and it is quite—quite other than the man you show to me. You should be grateful for that at least—very grateful!"

She paused, a little out of breath, while he lifted his head and looked at her, smiling furtively under the hand at his moustache, amused and flattered in spite of himself.

Erica's tone changed with a very evident effort to one of banter.

"What will she be like, I often wonder," she said—"the woman before whom you will condescend to show yourself as you are; the woman who—being, I dare say, no better than the rest of us—is destined to shine in your fascinated eyes as the one perfect specimen, transcending in beauty and charm the rest of her unlovely sex?"

"Have you really wondered about that?" he asked indifferently, but looking at her with some little curiosity the while.

"Perhaps I can picture her," she went on daringly, for she was angry, she did not know why, and she was determined to move him by any means, legitimate or not. "She shall be tall—taller than I am—oh, a thousand times more imposing! She shall have hair of a reddish golden, and perfect teeth—a good deal shown. Her

eyes shall be very blue and wide and good-humoured. But her nose—ah, that must be a trifle short and broad, and her jaw is the least little heavy. Her mouth, too, is large, but well shaped, no doubt, and smiling. Yes, she must smile a good deal, because of her great good luck in having secured you. But while she smiles, and her thoughts are with you—perhaps—her eyes are not with you—the beautiful wide eyes, with the black fringes—but wandering—wandering beyond you, meeting the eyes of others who are looking and admiring and envying——”

Barty had opened his own hard blue eyes, and was looking with astonishment and displeasure upon the speaker. She saw quite plainly what she represented. It was evidently no fancy sketch. At once he knew that she had seen the woman whom she described; that somehow she had heard the old story of that unhappy love affair of his.

“In detail it seems that I can’t have done her justice,” Erica went on, laughing a little nervously; “yet she shall be a very beautiful woman, this ideal woman of yours, who eclipses all the rest of the world.”

Barty dropped his eyes from her face, half closing them as he looked away.

“Is she Penelope, the parlour-maid?” he asked. “You seem to have been under the trouble of giving an exceedingly unflattering description of Penelope. I think

I am in a position to promise you that the fair Penny will not prove to be the loadstar of my existence."

It was ordained, however, that the "fair Penny" should occupy more of his thoughts for the future than Barty in his superciliousness and his blindness thought possible just then.

CHAPTER VIII.

LOST AND FOUND.

IT was on a Sunday afternoon that Barty, lounging about with his pipe and his dog in the vicinity of the house, encountered Dicky Birch going hastily homeward.

"I've been looking all over the place for that fellow Shady," Birch said irritably; "one of the colts down on the fen has broken his confounded leg. I've sent Balls off with a gun to kill the poor devil. No one knows how long it has been done, or when Shady was last there. I'm growing sick of that slouching, idle hound, I can tell him. Where the dickens is the fellow?"

Barty set off at a good pace toward the fen.

"They'll be pulling that poor brute about," he muttered to himself, "putting it to torture before they kill it. I wouldn't trust that order of thick-skinned numskulls with such a job as that."

For, considering the apathy with which he regarded the affairs of mankind, the wrongs and the sufferings of animals did appeal to Barty in a strange degree. He was the terror of those people in the neighbourhood

who owned used-up donkeys, broken-down horses, emaciated creatures with sore backs, swollen fetlocks and stiff knees. He was particularly avoided by that order of youth who are under the impression that cats are made to be tortured and rather enjoy the operation, and who are of opinion that dumb things generally are created to have stones thrown at them.

On one occasion he had remarked a man, on one of the small farms still left to Birch to till, of whom a certain cart-horse coming under this particular yokel's care was evidently afraid. He was told that this man bore an excellent character, was a favourite with the farm-steward, Shady Bush, and was trustworthy with the horses. Barty said nothing, but relentlessly he watched his man. There had not been that expression of terror in that particular horse's eye for nothing, he knew.

At last he triumphed, and dragged before his master for instant dismissal a stupid, brutal-looking lout, shrinking from the clutch of Barty's hand upon his collar, and trying to escape from the vicinity of Barty's avenging toe. He had been caught in the act of cruelly beating the same frightened animal about the face with his huge clenched fists.

Barty put his pipe in his pocket now, pulled his cap over his eyes, buttoned his coat about him, and ran.

He had gone through the courtyard at the back of the Hall, through one meadow, the grass wet beneath his foot with the heavy gray mist lying upon it, and was throwing his leg over the gate of another, when at no great distance he heard the sound of voices.

He stopped, astride the gate, and listened. Yes, it was Shady Bush's slow drawl. He was speaking in that monotonous, most unmelodious tone habitual to him, and across the hoarse, unemotional croak came now and again the sound of a woman's passionate weeping.

"What's that scoundrel up to now?" Barty asked himself, and whistled a shrill warning of his presence.

At that the woman's crying instantly ceased, and in a second or two Barty could make out her figure running across the field where the gray cloud of mist was closing in. She was going in the direction of another gate, while her companion came slowly forward and encountered Hugh Barty.

"What have you been doing to that poor girl to make her cry, man?" Barty inquired of him, for he had easily recognised the running figure.

Mr. Shadrach Bush was an ill-made, ill-looking man, with great breadth and length of body, comparatively short legs, and arms of unusual length. He had a bullet head of stiff dark hair cut close, and a whitish, unwholesome-looking face. He was always neatly and

respectably dressed, and was generally respectful in his manner and civil in his speech. He was an especial aversion of Barty's, and "Thank God! the loathsome beggar hates me like the devil," he had said more than once, having noticed a certain something in the glance of Shady's dull eyes, or in the hoarse civility of Shady's thick voice, which seemed to indicate that no love was lost between the incongruous pair. Yet poor Bush's employer had a great belief in the cleverness of his farm-steward, and although he was always finding fault with him to his face and behind his back, Dicky Birch would have fancied himself lost—"in a hole," as he always put it—without Shadrach to stand at his right hand.

"It was Penelope, sir, from up to the house," Bush said submissively, in reply to Barty's question. He did not glance in that gentleman's face, but down at the clover-ley at his feet. "Me and Penelope had a matter she were wishful to discuss this arternoon. That were all, sir."

"You seem to have discussed it to a pretty tune! Have you been plaguing the girl to marry you, Bush, and she won't have you?"

Shady lifted his heavy lids, and furtively regarded his questioner.

"Penelope have been a-askin' of me to marry her, sir, on the contrary," he said.

"Poor devil! I guessed as much. It isn't the first time I've found her crying about lately. Well?"

"And I refused of her, sir."

"You won't marry her?"

"No, sir. I have not the intention so to do at present. For reasons best known to myself I have refused of her."

"You are a d——d scoundrel!" Barty said. "Get out of my path, before I kick you out!"

Shady Bush turned in the dew-drenched grass, and looked after the tall figure striding away from him.

"Master," he called, "you can keep yer bargain yerself, for me. If so be as y'are so set on her, y'are welcome to yer own."

Before Barty reached his destination, he heard the shot which told him that his errand was probably a vain one. But he determinedly ran on, and found, among the small knot of men standing in the gray dusk around the carcase of the unfortunate colt, Lucian Harcourt.

"Had he died at once?" Barty asked; and was told that "Mr. Harcourt, he had seen to that. Mr. Harcourt had finished him off in style, he had."

"He was dead before he knew it," Harcourt said.

He was still holding the gun, and had gone on

his knees to peer at the mortal wound which he had made.

"I didn't know you were here," Barty said. "I heard the shot as I came across the young wheat field."

Harcourt arose from his kneeling position, and handed the weapon to one of the men.

"It's a stupid way of killing anything," he said, as he turned to walk homeward by Barty's side.

"Why?"

"Oh, a gun that can be heard a mile off——"

"I don't see the necessity for secrecy in the matter."

"Oh no; it's all right enough. Only the knife comes easier to me, of course."

"I don't know that I'm particularly surprised," Barty was saying, as Erica came down to breakfast the next morning.

The young man—footman, butler, and several other things combined—had just brought in the tea-urn. He was a youth, distinguished by a quite remarkable softness of head and heart, who did the work of most of the women-servants about the place, as well as the quite respectable amount that was his rightful share. He had always a heated and harassed appearance, and his face was now wearing a particularly startled look. He had evidently just made what to him had appeared

an important communication, to which Barty had replied in the above terms.

Erica paused in the doorway, looking for enlightenment to the faces of the three men.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Penny has taken herself off," Harcourt said.

He pulled out the chair before the tea-board at which Erica was to sit, and he bowed and smiled to her over the back of it as he spoke.

"Gone?" Erica said. "Penny?" She came forward wide-eyed, and took her place. "What do you mean by 'gone'?" she demanded sternly of Hallett, the young man in the pink jacket, standing open-mouthed at the head of the table.

He was a devoted admirer of the sex, and slaved his life away in the service of women; but they all addressed him sternly, from Penny Bye herself to the little maid in the scullery. He was used to the imperious tone. He ceased staring helplessly at Barty, and closed his gaping mouth preparatory to speech.

"She've gone, miss—Penny have gone. That were her evenin' out last night, which Penny go to tea oncet in three weeks to her father's—leastwise, to Mr. Bye the blacksmith, which he is her father. And she never come home, miss."

"Never came home!" Erica repeated. She took the toast-rack, which he had aimlessly pounced on, and

was desperately clinging to, from Hallett's hand. "And what is surprising in that? Probably her father and mother wished her to stay with them for the night. It was a bitterly cold night."

"Begging your pardon, no, miss. I was just a-tellin' the young gentlemen" (his unfailing designation of Dicky Birch's men. He had presumably grasped the idea that his services were engaged in an establishment for the education of youth, and that poor Dicky himself was the schoolmaster. At the flattering title Barty's hand was wont to go up in silent protest to his thinning locks)—"I was just a-tellin' the young gentlemen as how Mrs. Jacks" (the housekeeper), "she sent down to Byes' the first thing this mornin', and they hain't—neither Mr. Bye, nor yet Mrs. Bye nayther—so much as set eyes on Penny."

"Not seen her? Well, but did not you say she went there to tea? Where was Penny, then, last night?"

"That we can't none of us say, miss. She were last seen by any of the servants a-walkin' up the back midder by the side o' Mr. Shady Bush—the gentleman as Penny walk with, miss."

Harcourt, who was seated at the table, leaned across it to help himself to buttered toast.

"I saw her after that," he said; "I saw her hanging about at the back of the house, when I came in from

shooting the horse. I remember, because she was crying, and I spoke to her."

"I had seen her half an hour earlier," Barty said; "she was crying then."

Harcourt turned upon him swiftly:

"Perhaps she confided to you the reason of her tears?" he asked. "She would not give it to me, although I asked for it."

"Nor to me," Barty said slowly; "perhaps because I did not ask her for it."

"Mrs. Bye, she's in the kitchen a-cryin' and a-takin' on to Mrs. Jacks, miss," Hallett volunteered.

Erica arose.

"I will go to her at once," she said; and, followed by the feverish and greatly perturbed Hallett, she left the room.

Barty sat at the table, regarding its contents with a moody face; and, leaning on his elbow, dragged at his moustache, as his manner was when engaged in thought, succeeding now, through desperate tugging, in pulling its ends below his chin.

"That poor girl was evidently in trouble," he said, without lifting his eyes to Harcourt's face. "I hope to heaven she has not come to mischief!"

"You're anxious. Perhaps you can account for her trouble," Harcourt said quickly, with a sneer on his lip.

Barty started from his meditative posture, and looked a fierce question at the young man opposite. The handsome sallow-complexioned face was paler than usual; the lips were white; there was a glitter of unconcealed hatred in the dark, luminous eyes.

"What the devil do you mean?" Barty asked him.

"Mean?" Harcourt said, and laughed not very pleasantly, shrugging his shoulders and turning out the palms of his hands, with one of his un-English gestures. "Oh, nothing—anything—anything you like to imagine."

Barty glared at him in silence for a minute with his hard blue eyes.

"I don't know what you're driving at," he said slowly at length; "but, on the other hand, it is immaterial—I don't want to know. If I thought it worth while to quarrel with you," he went on, getting up from the table, "I should call you an impertinent little jackass. As it is, I will leave you to get your breakfast by yourself."

Barty had his own opinion of the probable cause of Penelope's disappearance. He did not join the group, of which Erica now made one, anxiously discussing the subject in the kitchen, but he waited about near the house for Mrs. Bye, and spoke to her as, sobbingly, she took her homeward way.

He questioned and tried to reassure the woman,

asking her for the names of those friends or relatives to whom Penny would be most likely to turn in distress of any kind.

"She ain't gone to none o' them—I know she ain't," the woman said, her shawl held to her lips, her tears dropping unrestrained, and with accustomed readiness, from her eyes. "My girl wouldn't turn her back on her mother for none o' them."

"Oh, nonsense!" Barty said kindly; "you can't tell. Why, where should she be? She's gone off somewhere—in all probability to this aunt you tell me of at Clapton, or this other in Yorkshire. Country girls have a craze to get to London or to the North. Look here, let me write down the addresses. I'll do this for you: I'll walk into Sedboro' in the course of the morning and telegraph to these people, and I'll wait there and get answers back from them. Do you go home and write to them, and to anyone else you think of, to be on the look-out for her, and to take her in if she goes to them later on, and to let you know at once should she do so. Lost? People are not lost so easily. We shall find her safe enough."

But he himself was by no means so confident as he seemed. The girl was a very beautiful girl, simple and gentle, and, as far as he had seen, modest. Except to drive now and again in her father's cart into the nearest market-town, he supposed she had never been

out of Grainge in her life. Embarked on a strange, unfriendly world alone, what sort of voyage was she likely to make? Barty remembered Penelope Bye as he had first seen her, and recalled how struck he had been with her unusual beauty, and how Harcourt and the other fellows had raved about her form and face, and would have made a fool of the girl if she had not shown more sense and self-respect than they. Picturing the freshness and placid contentment of the face when he had first seen it, to recall it as it had appeared to him but yesterday gave him an unpleasant mental shock.

He would certainly walk into Sedboro', and do what he could for poor Penny; but first he would go and get his breakfast.

He found that the master of the house had come down, and was deeply engaged in the making of his own meal, and not much impressed by the occurrence which had engrossed the others.

Erica, who had attended to her father's wants, rose and went from the room as Barty came in. She had had a private conversation with Mrs. Jacks after Penny's mother had left, which had shocked and saddened her very much. Poor Penny—to be never more mentioned but with sorrow and shame in the house to which she came light-hearted and fair of fame as of face!

"Beauty is a curse to a woman in that class of life," Dicky said lightly, removing the top of his second egg; "it is only what one might have expected, perhaps."

"That infernal Shady of yours ought to be kicked," Barty said; "I'd see him hanged before I'd keep him on a day after this, were I in your place—a lying, slippery blackguard!"

Then he told the other man of what he had overheard on the previous afternoon, and of the poor girl's bitter weeping.

Birch was very indignant.

"I'll have the scoundrel in as soon as I've snatched a bit of breakfast," he said, "and I'll hear what he has to say for himself. And whatever face he puts upon it, I'll get rid of him, Barty. I'll promise you that—I'll get rid of him. The girl was a fool, poor thing! Dear me! a wrong-headed fool! Why didn't she come to me? I'd have seen to it that Bush married her if she wished it. I'd have kicked him to the church myself but that he should have done it."

Barty was as good as his word. He walked the four miles to Sedboro' along the hard frosty road. He sent his telegrams and waited an hour or so for the replies—unsatisfactory when they came. Neither the aunt in Yorkshire nor the aunt in Clapton had heard or seen anything of Penelope Bye. He had added to

his message of inquiry in each case a request that, in the event of the girl seeking refuge with either aunt, she should be kept, and intimation of the fact be sent at once to Grainge.

Now that he had done all that had occurred to him to do in the matter, he hastened to put it from his mind. He had waited for the return telegrams in the billiard-room of the County Club, of which he was a member, and he took his lunch there before he walked homeward.

The heavy mist of the night before was frozen into crystals upon grass and hedge and tree; the sun was shining through a golden haze upon a world of fairy-like beauty. Barty enjoyed his pipe, striding briskly through the frosty air, a stalwart man in the prime of life and in perfect health, with no canker of serious trouble lying at his heart.

Poor Penelope! Her sorrows and her flight had fallen to the background of his thoughts, which were busy with his own affairs.

He had not yet mentioned the fact at Flint Hall, but he was intending to leave that abode to-morrow, possibly for some months—too probably never to return. Sir William Barty and his wife were going, under medical orders, to the South of Europe. Bill—poor Bill!—had spoken of it to him as his “last chance,” but Hugh himself had known it was not even that. He

had known that the poor fellow was only being sent away to die.

He had been so impressed with this fact when he had last ridden over to Bigby to say good-bye to his brother and his brother's wife, that he had resolved on a great sacrifice of personal inclination, and on his return had written to offer, in case his presence would be likely to afford any comfort to his brother and Lady Barty, to accompany them.

This offer had been eagerly accepted. He had acted on the spur of the moment, leaving himself no time for preparation. He would have to disclose his plan on his return to Flint Hall, pack up his belongings to-night, and be off to Bigby the first thing in the morning.

It was not more the outcome of habitual reserve than his rooted conviction that his affairs could only be expected to bore other people to the extent that those of most other people bored him, which had prompted his reticence on this and all other matters. But he knew that he must contemplate an absence of many months, even if he ever returned to the pleasant familiar roof he was leaving; and he wondered a little how Dicky—for whom he had a certain affection—would feel about his going away.

And, to his credit be it spoken, he thought a good deal of Bill—poor Bill, who had had all the plums out of the cake, the best the world could give, but who

lacked the one blessing, health, without which all earth's choicest treasures were worthless.

Hugh was only the baronet's half-brother. They had had different mothers—the elder boy inheriting from his his fine fortune and his consumptive tendencies, while Hugh had to mourn the fact that his father's second marriage had been one of the affections merely, and that all he derived from his parents was his strong frame and his second son's miserable portion.

Yet he had been fond of Bill, he supposed. He had not thought about it at all until the other day, when he had said "Good-bye," and, riding homeward after it, had recognised the fact that at Bigby, where he and Bill had been boys together, he would probably see the peevish, sickly face of his brother never again.

He thought of him now as he walked along, watching the smoke from his pipe go out on the frosty air, the grass of the roadway crackling under his feet, the trees above him stretching leafless, begemmed branches to the sky, a white shining beauty all around and about him. And he bethought him, too, of how a not very pleasant period was before himself—a period of watching, beneath a blue, unfriendly sky, suffering that he would be powerless to help, the ebbing away of a life that he would have given much to save.

He knew, of course, and could not help remembering, what his brother's death would do for him; but he

wished with all his heart that fortune could have come to him by means less expensive than the cost of Bill's life. And he thought, truly enough, that he would have gone on "starving" on his five hundred a year for ever, if the child whom he had seen die might have been spared to take his father's place.

Barty himself had given up looking forward to inheriting Bigby years ago. He had done very well, he told himself dispassionately, without enthusiasm or complaint. His life had been tolerably happy, he supposed. Happy? Who was happy? An ornamental phrase, sounding very well in the mouths of boys and girls fresh from their fairy books. The most that a sane man could do was to take things as they were, and to be—if not content—silent.

He did not grudge the estate to old Bill. No; he wished he could have kept it; and his boy—the poor little plucky, patient fellow, who had been fond of his Uncle Hugh—after him.

Barty himself would never marry. For what should he want the money and the title now? A half-dozen years ago, perhaps, things might have been different. If he had stepped into his brother's shoes then, he would probably have been a married man with two or three children about him now; and Dalling—here he laughed his short laugh, and cut at the hedge beneath which he walked with his stick, bringing a starry glitter of sparkl-

ing crystals about him—why, Dalling, he supposed, would have been out of it.

Then, for the briefest space, the figure of the beautiful girl he had loved, to his own great disquiet, rose before him. He saw the large mouth always smiling; the even, perfect teeth; the wide blue eyes, with their habit of roving while she talked or listened——

Where had Birch's daughter come across Lady Dalling, he wondered? That she had done so, and knew all about the sickening old story, was evident. That was an odd girl—clever in her way, too, and amusing when one was in the mood for amusement. When he came to think of it, how most of the other women of her age whom he knew would have bored him to death in her place! As a matter of fact—to be just to her now that she was about to disappear from his path—poor old Dicky's "Eric" had never bored him. Yes. That was a daring thing to do—that description of Eva Dalling. He had been annoyed for the minute, but he laughed with some amusement now, remembering it.

"She thought she'd gone too far," he said to himself with a chuckle, recalling a momentary look of quailing in the gray eyes as Erica had finished. "What an odd mixture she is—like all the rest of them, after all—of daring and timidity! I wonder what will become of that

lovelorn, jealous little lump of vanity, Harcourt, when the fair Erica departs?" he said.

With that he turned with the turning of the road, and with the change of view his thoughts changed too. He was back in Grainge again now. The church, crowning the gently rising land, was before him, the Rectory, a new, deeply-red erection of Gothic architecture in the midst of its wild, uncultivated garden, loudly asserting itself by the church's side. A half-mile farther on, and Flint Hall, now hidden by its trees, would be in sight. Barty knocked out the ashes and put his pipe in his pocket.

The road just here passed by the plantation, where was to be had the one decent day's sport among the pheasants which Birch's poor preserves afforded; where, in the spring-time, the village children, regardless of prohibition, came primrose-picking; where, in the autumn, they broke down fences and wire-netting in search of nuts. Some larch-trees, bordering the road, hung their feathery branches over Barty's head. He looked up through their frozen fringes, and might have thought how delicately beautiful they looked against the brightening blue of the sky; but thought instead of the horse he had been riding, and should not want for a month or so. Should he send it up to the Court during his absence? or should he have its shoes knocked off, and

get Birch to let the animal have the run of the paddock? Or should——

But here his thoughts were effectually startled out of that channel for ever. For his ear, accustomed to the long unbroken silence of the still, deserted scene, was suddenly assailed by a cry—a gasping cry of terror. Considerably astonished, Barty pulled up, and lifted his head to listen. The cry came from close at hand, in the plantation. There was a noise of crackling undergrowth, of breaking branches, and then, a few yards ahead of where he stood, a figure, uttering another gasping cry, burst through the straggling fence separating the grove of trees from the road, and half leapt, half threw itself down the broken, shelving bank. The figure of a woman—Erica!

At the same instant she saw him; and almost before, in her distraught condition, with her face of pallid horror, Barty had recognised her, she had hurled herself upon him, and had wildly clutched him in her grasp, catching him by shoulder and arms.

“God of heaven! what is it?” he said. He dropped the stick he held, and threw his arms closely about her, for even as she held to him her body swayed away, and he thought that she was falling. “Eric! what is it?” he said.

Her head had fallen helplessly backward; her jaw was shaking. In the fingers that clutched him so

desperately, in the distended eyes, in the panting, sobbing breath, was to be seen the extremity of her terror.

"In there—in the grove!" she gasped. "Murdered—she is murdered—Penny—I saw her——"

"Murdered!"

He took his arms from about her, and would have wrenched away the hands that desperately clung to him. It was not an easy task to free himself from those tenacious fingers. Again and again, as he shook them off, they caught at him.

"You shall not leave me; I will not be alone! You shall not go!" she sobbed, not knowing what she said, beside herself with the shock she had received.

He caught her hands, hurting them with the violence of his grasp.

"I must go!" he said. "Be quiet; be reasonable! Are you sure of what you saw? Where is it? Try to tell me—where?"

His strong clasp and the harshness of his tone affected Erica somewhat. She ceased to sob, and made an effort to control the shaking of her limbs.

"I can't tell you," she said helplessly. "Take me with you: I dare not be left."

He did not lose time in dissuading her. Half dragging, half lifting her, he pulled her back through the gap in the straggling fence. Once within the white and silent beauty of the grove, finding that she still

swayed in her walk, he shifted his grasp of her from her hand to her arm, and thence, when presently she stumbled over some undergrowth which had entangled her heavy feet and nearly fell, to her waist.

So for the space of a few minutes they walked, getting by that time into the heart of the little wood. Barty wanted to question her, but, seeing her shattered condition, refrained, lest her strength should desert her before her task was done.

Once, sobbingly, she spoke to him.

"I came to see—the rime-frost on the trees," she said. "There was some moss and leaves—so beautiful—I stooped down. And something red—I followed it—and behind the tree—she was lying—Penny! Oh, I can't tell you—I daren't see again. Don't make me—don't make me! Oh, you won't—you won't!"

She stopped and slipped through his sustaining arms to her knees upon the carpet of crackling leaves. The trees were thick just there, the sun only falling upon the ground in patches.

"It is near—it is *there!*" Erica said, pointing in a direction from which her head was turned. "It is behind a big tree—the top has been struck away—one branch sticks up. Oh, you won't be long—you won't leave me here—promise that you will come back!"

But he had not waited to reply.

It was less than fifty yards from where Erica had

sunk down that he found what he sought. She was lying a few feet from the path which ran through the centre of the grove, behind the lightning-struck tree—lying bare-headed, her frigid face upon the frozen leaves, her blind eyes staring dreadfully up at the pitiless blue of the sky shining through the sparkling branches. The horror stamped on them for ever had robbed the poor stiff features of all their beauty. Her limbs were peacefully extended; but the leaves and moss that formed her couch were all hideously reddened, and on the open fingers of her right hand, which had been drenched with blood, a weapon lay; and her throat had been cut from ear to ear.

Barty went down on his knees, looked at the only half-shut glassy eyes, laid his hand for an instant over the still heart, saw that the blood had dried upon the razor and the stiffly-curved fingers on which it lay; satisfied himself, regretfully enough, that there was nothing to be done—that, all successfully, to her own ruined life poor Penny had put the period.

By no means unmoved he looked upon the ghastly sight. It was horrible; and Barty was quite sensible of the horror of it. He could have enlarged to himself upon the theme—the pity of it. A beautiful, good, and gentle girl to have known such despair! to have been driven to such a strait! and by such a man!

“Infernal brute! I would like to see him swing for

it!" he said, and he cursed his old aversion, Shadrach Bush, silently to himself over the poor body.

Then he got up from his knees and turned away.

It was in truth a ghastly sight. His nerves were strong, and he had been prepared for what he had to see, yet he knew that it would be before him with unpleasant frequency for many a long day—the livid rigid face and the hideous gaping wound beneath it! Small wonder the girl Eric—a girl of nervous imaginative temperament, of such a tender heart and such delicate sensibilities—small wonder that she had been upset, he said to himself.

The sight from which he had turned had chilled him to the marrow, but his blood flowed warmly again within him as the sweeter image rose before him of Eric clinging with her white, soft fingers to him. The instinct of pity for what was so feeble and frightened hastened his steps, the sudden passionate longing to protect and comfort what was so lovely and so lovable throbbed through his pulses and beat loudly within his breast. Nothing more was to be done for Penelope. The poor girl had done for herself too thoroughly. And there was this other woman——

When, after a few hasty strides, he came upon her, Erica to all outward appearance was as dead as Penelope herself. She had slipped from the trunk of the tree against which she had leant, and now lay motion-

less upon the brown leaves and the deep, gem-sprinkled moss.

Once more poor Barty, after a startled stare of dismay, went down upon his knees; but even as he did so Erica's eyes opened, staring with but half-awakened consciousness into the trees above her head. He saw the blank expression of her face change to that late one of horror, and knew that memory had returned. With a gasp of shuddering terror she rose upon her arm.

"Don't be frightened—I am here," Barty said with anxious gentleness. But for the familiar red face above her, Erica might not have recognised the voice. "You fainted, but you're all right now, aren't you? Your head is bare—let me lift your head."

But Erica pulled herself away from him and sat upright.

"Penny?" she asked, looking at him with horror-darkened eyes full of a shrinking questioning. "You saw her? She *was* there?"

"I saw her. There is nothing to be done."

"Oh, I knew that she was dead!—but I hoped it was a dream," she said, with her woman's logical way of putting things.

Then, being so weak and upset, she covered her face with her hands and, with her head bent upon her knees, burst into sobs and weeping.

Barty regarded her without impatience and in serious distress. It was a mistake of Nature, perhaps, that women were made so—to be capable only of making a fuss when action was demanded, to break down helplessly at every crisis. It was a pity, but——

Slowly he got upon his feet.

“You are not going—you won’t leave me?” Erica cried, momentarily lifting to him a face of anxious appeal.

“Of course I will not leave you—of course I would not while you care to keep me,” he said. “Look here—I am quite close. Nothing can harm you—do not be afraid.”

He could not reason with her from his six feet two of altitude to where she sat crouched upon the earth, so he resumed his kneeling posture and leant with one hand above his head upon the trunk of the tree which had supported her. With the other he tightly clasped that hand of hers which she had dropped from her face to look at him.

A long minute of that close grasp, and then Erica’s weeping ceased.

“Who did it?” she asked him in a whisper, shuddering. “Who could have murdered her?”

“It is not murder—she has killed herself,” he said slowly; “the knife is in her hand still.”

“How dreadful—oh, how dreadful! And that I should

find her! How shall we tell her mother? Oh, how can her mother ever be told?"

"Hush! Do not think of it. I will see to it. We won't talk of it. Do you know that you should not be sitting here?—you must not. You must let me help you up. You are feeling better?"

"Better, but my strength is gone and my head swims. One minute—you will let me wait one minute longer?"

"Yes. After that I will help you on to the road; then I must find someone to wait with you while I run home for a carriage."

But Erica would not hear of that plan. She grasped his hand closer.

"You promised that you would not leave me," she said.

It was very flattering; the more so that the girl was in no condition to be conscious of her flattery. Involuntarily he drew closer and bent his face nearer to hers, till her smooth cheek was within an inch of his own, and her ruffled hair lightly brushed him with every movement. In that posture he again made protestation, hurriedly and below his breath, that while she wished for him he would not leave her.

But it was, after all, but a minute or so longer that she sat in that mentally half-numbed condition among the dead leaves beneath the bare branches of the plan-

tation. And by the time Barty, with the gentlest, most anxious care, had lifted her through the fence and down the bank again, and she was walking at his side upon their homeward way, Erica was fully herself, and no longer clung to him or entreated him to stay.

CHAPTER IX.

SHADRACH'S BIBLE OATH.

ALONE that evening over their pipes—the rest of the household having retired for the night—sat Hugh Barty and his host. It was not until then that the former undertook to break the news of his impending departure. To this plan Birch listened with lively expressions of a quite unfeigned regret.

“Why, we always count on you till February, old man,” he said. “There’s some birds lying in the mangel yet, and we ought to get another fair day at the pheasants in the grove.”

That he was in no hurry, Barty declared, placidly pulling at his pipe. But there was Bill to think of; and Bill’s wife, who had been shaken by her boy’s death, must not be left to face what was before her alone.

“Ah, a sad trouble, poor soul! a sad trouble!” Dicky said, with a deep-drawn sigh of sympathy. “And you’re a good fellow, Barty—a very good fellow—to stand by them! Only there’s the birds—and the other fellows aren’t so keen as you, when sport’s scarce. And I thought we’d give the harriers a turn next week; and

old Antingham was asking me about bringing the beagles over—but, well, it can't be helped, and it's what I'd do myself in your place, Barty, for I've had my troubles myself, and I've got a heart that can feel for others, old man; and that you can testify full well."

In silence, but for his slow puffing at his pipe, Barty acknowledged his ability to do this. Presently Dicky, always conversationally inclined, was off again.

"It's been pleasant having you with us while Eric was at home," he said. "I wanted you to know my girl Eric. And she has not been in the way, eh, Barty?"

"How can you reconcile yourself to sending your only child away from you?" Barty said, not choosing directly to answer the question. "You and she should stick together, I take it."

"There's my men, you know," Birch reminded him. "I've explained to you how it all is."

"Let the men go hang," Barty said, looking, with one eye screwed up, down the short barrel of the briarwood, which was not "drawing" satisfactorily. "You and she should keep together."

"But, my dear fellow, you know how I am situated. You are pretty well aware—all the county is—what is the state of my exchequer. Without my men it would be impossible for me to live as I do. The hunter would have to go, Hugh, and the second nag. I should be obliged to let the shooting——"

"You could live somehow, I suppose," Barty said, unmoved. "You could be together, and know that she was all right."

Birch smoked on in a kind of crest-fallen silence. He was himself so deeply convinced of the impossibility of making those sacrifices! It was disconcerting to find Barty, of all people—Barty, with his strong common-sense and his tastes, which jumped so agreeably with Dicky's own—pretending that the thing should be done.

"I have every confidence in my sister Eliza—every confidence," he said presently, but in a small and disheartened tone. Then his face suddenly cleared, and his blue eyes met the other man's brightly again. "Besides, it's better for Eric herself," he said, joyfully conscious of having hit upon the right argument. "Eliza's husband—well, you know about him; he is one of the most successful men of the day at the Bar, I suppose. He is making his thousands a year. Unpleasant fellow—never liked him; but that's neither here nor there. There's no child, you know, and Eric—Eric's like their own, and I make no doubt will be treated as their own. Oh, you can be quite sure I've not been blind to my child's interests, Barty, although I've sacrificed my own."

Barty, however, only grunted a reply, whether of dissent or conviction it was impossible to say.

"And when anything happens to Eliza and to Perry—when Eric is a rich woman—whenever that happens—

then I can give up my men at last, Barty—give you all the sack, old man—and put a few more horses in the stable, and have my girl home with me.”

Birch was waxing very lively in joyous expectation of his only sister's death; but Barty, who had heard it said that that lady was ten years younger than her brother, did not experience any particular elation at the thought.

“Miss Birch will probably be married by then,” he said.

“There, again,” Birch cried brightly, airily waving his pipe towards the speaker; “Eric will make a far better marriage from her aunt's house than she could possibly make under the guardianship of such a harum-scarum fellow as myself—her mother's unfortunate history sticking to her. There, again.”

“Her mother is dead?” Barty said in a low voice.

He had been told the story of the woman's death in many a midnight *tête-à-tête* such as this, yet to-night he was conscious of an unwonted satisfaction in the confirmation of that fact.

“Dead, I thank God! And I forgave her, Barty. I forgave her, and held her hand upon her death-bed, and sat by her till she died. Ah, in the long count of my shortcomings, Hugh, I hope that that much, at least, will be reckoned to my credit—that I forgave her. Only Heaven and myself know how much I had to forgive.”

Being wound up then on a not unfavourite theme, he went on at greater length to discourse on his wrongs

and his sufferings, while Barty, lying motionless in his chair, his pipe between his lips, neither encouraged nor interrupted, thinking his own thoughts.

A man who wasn't mad or a fool would consider twice before he married Erica Birch—poor old impecunious, extravagant Dicky's daughter, the daughter of her mother. A man was a fool to marry at all, perhaps; to marry into a dangerous set, a double-dyed ass!

He got as far as that, urging his thoughts along the course, and then they slipped beyond his control, and Erica was clinging to him again, and he was holding her, in the moment's surprise and bewilderment, closely against his heart. And she was lying white and fair and insensible among the crystallized leaves; and she was gazing with the unconsciousness of terror into his face, and catching at his sleeve, and begging him not to leave her.

"There's no stopping her—a woman bent on going to the devil," Birch concluded, and wiped his eyes, heaving a wavering sigh.

And Barty awoke from his dreaming also with a sigh, and the subject was changed between them.

They recurred to that one which had been the topic of the day, until the above digression had occurred—Penelope Bye's death.

"I wish the girl had come to me," Birch declared, for the fiftieth time recording the futile wish. "I'd have

helped her with the father and mother, poor child! and I'd have punished that sneaking rascal that is as much her murderer, Barty, as if he'd cut her throat himself."

"Yes," Barty admitted slowly; "my only regret is that he did not do it. There would have been a certain relief to one's feelings in seeing the beggar hanged. And, you know," he went on, sitting upright in his chair, and speaking with serious impressiveness, "it isn't at all clear to me that he didn't do it. It's an easy dodge to put the razor back against the girl's hand; and her throat was cut in such a fashion—— Well, poor wretch! she must have been pretty desperate to make such a gash as that."

Birch shook his head deprecatingly.

"By Jove! Barty, when you hate a man you stop at nothing," he said. "Shady has been a ruffian about this poor girl, no doubt; but, hang it all! he isn't so bad as you'd make out."

"I believe that he is bad enough for anything," Barty said.

And at that instant, as he sank back in his chair again, the words still on his lips, there came a loud tap upon the window, removed by no great distance from the back of Mr. Birch's chair.

That gentleman, in a not very pleasant surprise, started round and stared angrily at the window.

"What the devil was that?" he asked.

The rap was loudly repeated, and Barty arose from his chair, and went toward the window. He was peering curiously through it, making out the outline of an indistinct figure barely emerging from the darkness around. A slight movement of this figure, and a sudden illumination fell upon it and the white face surmounting it with a rather startling effect.

Barty laughed grimly, and, drawing his hands from his pockets, unfastened the window; when a short man, bearing a dark lantern in his hand, came into the room.

"Who the devil is it?" Birch repeated angrily, being disagreeably mystified by the proceeding.

"It is the gentleman of whom we spoke: it is Mr. Bush," Barty explained, and turned his back on "the gentleman," and walked over to the fireplace.

Dicky turned in his chair, and waved the approaching figure of his steward angrily back.

"That will do; keep your place, sir. Where the devil are you coming to?" he demanded fiercely. "How dare you presume to come into my presence? Why didn't you go to the kitchen? Where did you find the cheek to obtrude yourself upon me, you low blackguard, you? Take yourself off, sir! get out of the house, sir! Go to the devil! go to the kitchen!"

Bush, shifting his dark lantern to his left hand, knuckled his forehead, in token of respect, with the other.

"I hain't made bold to come without a-tryin' the

kitchen first, sir," he said, in his monotonous croak; "but the maids and Hallett they've scuttled off to bed; and there's a word I'm wishful to say to-night about this here death what's took place to-day."

Birch, looking extremely uncomfortable—as, to do him justice, he always felt when anything unpleasant had to be done—got up from his chair, and stood beside Barty on the rug, striving to gain encouragement from the presence of the stronger man, who, for his part, a certain suspicion in his mind, was watching Mr. Bush with a very keen eye.

"Wait a bit, my good fellow," Dicky said. "As it happens, Shady, I also have a word or two to say to you. I'll get that off my mind first, eh? It is, that after to-night—Mr. Barty here and I are agreed on the matter—you must get off my premises, Bush, and out of my sight. Do you hear? Yes, and do it quickly, man—do it quickly; and don't set foot on my place again! Do you hear?"

Dicky was very proud of having acquitted himself in such decisive style. He put his hands behind his coat-tails, drew up his head, and looked at Barty for approval out of the corner of his eye. Then he coughed a little, and began again:

"As for your wages, my man—the trifle due to you——"

Shady turned a lowering eye upon his late employer.

"There's a matter o' seven pound owin' to me. I'd like to have it down, master. You know as well as me you hain't never squared up wi' me straightfor'ard-like for years; and I bain't th' only one as ha' got that tale to tell."

"Keep to the point," Barty interposed here. "You'll get what belongs to you, sure enough, and I trust you'll get all you deserve into the bargain. There was something on your mind with regard to the girl who has been done to death to-day of which you wished to disburden yourself, you were saying?"

The possibility of that death being due to murder rather than to suicide had taken strong hold of Barty. He looked with a very eager scrutiny into the man's face. It certainly was an unprepossessing one—long of upper lip, heavy of jaw, narrow and retreating of brow. The black, dull-looking orbs detached themselves slowly from his master's, and travelled to Barty's face.

"There's some, mayhap, has got more on their minds than me," he said, with a certain evil-looking protruding of the heavy under-lip. "I were come here ready to take my Bible oath to the master I've lived along all my life, that harm to that p'or critter gone to her last account I never done. There's them—not so far off, nayther—put on their Bible oaths couldn't say so much, maybe.

That under lip—a particularly immobile feature in

itself—was pushed out so unmistakably in Barty's direction, there had been such an evident pointing of his last remark at him, that that gentleman, glaring fiercely, burst out with an angry question.

"What the devil do you mean?" he demanded.

Shadrach lifted the lantern he held and turned its light full upon Barty's face.

"Perhaps you wou'n't take your Bible oath, Mr. Barty, sir?" he said.

Barty, who had been leaning with his arm on the tall chimney-piece, started up.

"You infernal blackguard," he said, "get out! That is the second time you have dared to make that kind of remark to me. Do it again, and, by heaven! I'll kick you through the window."

"Get out of my sight, sir, get out of the house!" Birch cried, waving his hand to him, very red and loud and angry.

Barty, that formidable giant, looking, with eyes aflame, with anger quivering in his big frame, strung for action and capable quite easily of putting his threat into action, advanced upon his ignoble enemy. With the undrilled, undisciplined yokel the instinct of self-preservation is always stronger than the artificial courage which induces him to stand up to his foe. Therefore Shadrach retreated with discretion, and got himself with awkward celerity to the still open window.

There he made a moment's stand.

"I were ready wi' my Bible oath, remember," he said, addressing Birch. "Ask Mr. Barty if he'll take it along wi' me. Get Mr. Barty's Bible oath, master."

Barty made a stride forward, and Shady, hastily blundering through the window, vanished, turning off the light of his lantern as he did so, so that he appeared to be merged in the darkness.

Hugh Barty peered after him for a moment, and then with an angry crash drew down the window and fastened it.

"By heaven!" he said, "if that hound had not skulked away, I would have shaken the life out of him."

"I wish I'd got rid of Bush before—yes, I wish I'd taken your advice, my dear fellow," Birch said. "What was it the blackguard said, Hugh? What was he driving at?"

"Oh, what does the grunting of such an animal signify?" Barty said.

He was still furiously angry, and ashamed of himself for being so, and after his use, which was second nature to him, he set himself at once to hide the righteous indignation he felt.

"Oh, you're right," Dicky said with a sigh of relief—he, too, was so glad to be quit of an unpleasantness. "It's best not to take those kind of people seriously."

"People!" Barty repeated with an angry snort. "Do you call them *people*?"

But there he broke off with a suddenly altered expression of face and threw up his head and seemed to listen.

"Hush!" he said imperatively, frowning upon poor Dicky, who was doing and saying nothing.

A moment, and quick and eager, Barty had pulled open the door, had crossed the hall, and was standing at the foot of the stairs, peering eagerly upwards.

"Is that you, daddy dear?" came Erica's voice in a trembling, mysterious whisper.

Barty, with straining eyes, could make out an indistinct figure melting into the shadows of the unlit landing above him. Presently Erica's face, showing faintly above the dark drapery in which she had wrapped herself, bent down to him over the railing.

"Daddy, there is someone trying to get into the house," she whispered; "I am so frightened. I heard the kitchen door tried—I am quite certain I heard it, daddy. And then footsteps tramping round—footsteps of quite six persons, I should think—and a window was lifted somewhere, and after a time—I was too frightened to stir—cautiously closed again."

Barty might have laughed at that description of the anything but cautious manner in which he had slammed the window upon Mr. Bush's retreating form, but that he was in no mood for laughing.

Instead, he went down on his knees on the lowest stair, both because the devotional attitude suited the condition of his mind just then, and also because the better so he might get the view of the shrouded form, the pale bending face, and the hanging cloud of unbound hair.

"It is all right," he said in that new voice which Erica had heard from him for the first time to-day. "Don't be frightened. It is all right. Come down."

The figure shrank a little farther into the shadow; the face, with its shrouding hair, was no longer visible.

"Is it you? Oh! I thought it was my father."

"He is here. We are both here. No—don't go. Come down. For one minute come down."

But he knelt and prayed that passionate, humble prayer in vain. Eric was more afraid of him just then than of the terrible half-dozen burglars "tramping" round. Hugging her cloak more tightly about her night-dress, and blushing furiously in the darkness at the recollection of bare feet and unbound hair, she turned and fled.

Before her father retired for the night he gained admittance to Erica's room and set her mind at rest as to the mysterious sounds she had heard.

"It was that rascal Bush, dear child," he assured her, smiling over the foot of the bed at Erica, gazing uneasily at him, the bed-clothes pulled up to her chin. "He'll never frighten you again, love, for I've given him

the sack to-night, and ordered him to keep his ugly face off the place for the future."

"Oh, I am very glad! And was Mr. Barty there, daddy dear?"

"Barty was there. I've never seen Barty so thoroughly put out before. He threatened to kick poor Shady off the place—and, upon my life, I thought he was going to do it."

"Oh! But why?"

"A word or two Bush said. The rogue meant no harm, I dare say. I wish I'd got rid of him before, but the fellow suited me and was an honest fellow—and you know my way, Eric; I don't like to be hard on people. I dare say I'm imposed on and laughed at, and so on. But Barty! He should have known better than to attempt any hanky-pankies with Barty, the fool!"

"But how could Mr. Barty condescend to be angry, daddy?"

"You see, my dear child, it's a matter we can't say much about. Bush is in ill-odour, as you may have heard, Eric, about this unfortunate girl; and—well, in his muddled brain, I suppose, he thought his best plan was to blacken someone else. It's altogether an unpleasant business, love; we won't talk about it—only he was a double-dyed fool to pick on Barty; Barty could have shaken the life out of him——"

CHAPTER X.

"IT IS THE GREEN-EYED MONSTER."

IN spite of her womanly weakness and her shrinking from the task, it had been, after all, Erica who had taken the news of Penelope's death to Penelope's home.

It was a thing that had to be done at once, and, with the exception of Barty, there was no one to be trusted with such a mission who would undertake the sorrowful task; and, besides that a man is a bad hand at such sad work, Erica, through a certain insight and delicate sensibility where he was concerned, divined that to Barty the performance of such an errand would be peculiarly painful. Therefore, immediately on her return, she had braced herself to the exertion with the consideration that she would be sparing him, and had gone forth to fulfil the grievous duty.

"My Eric has gone to the poor mother," Dicky said, informing Hugh Barty of that fact, as he had been bidden to do.

And Barty had turned on him quite fiercely:

"Then what were you thinking about to allow her

to do so?" he demanded. "She is unnerved and thoroughly upset. You should not have let her go."

"She was crying her eyes out when she went," Dicky said; "she will tell them better so; she will cry with them. A woman is best in these things, Hugh."

Poor Dicky's own blue eyes were wet with tears. He had just seen them carry the body of poor Penny into the chamber where the inquest would be held to-morrow. The sight of the ghastly, staring face, of the wealth of yellow hair matted with blood, would have been enough to move a less tender heart than Dicky's.

And so, weeping and trembling, Erica had gone upon her mission, and had found its performance less difficult than she had expected.

That he—and more especially she—is born to trouble as the sparks fly upward, is a proverb more acquiesced in by the labourer or the mechanic and his wife than by their "betters." They bow their heads meekly, for the most part, and accept their inheritance of woe.

For a long time Erica stayed in the blacksmith's home. In such abodes, at such times, the presence of an outsider is regarded as a compliment rather than an intrusion, and she felt that she must not leave. At almost the first word the father had flung down the bar of iron which he was welding at the forge, and had

gone off, with bare, grimed arms and black apron, to the inn where his daughter lay; while the mother, with no impulse to hide herself and bewail her shame and grief alone, kept hold of Erica's hand, and wildly wept and ramblingly talked, in a manner that Erica guessed was a relief to the woman.

Finally, still with her tears running down her face, with failing limbs and trembling hands, in which dishes and plates clattered together, the bereaved woman bestirred herself to get her husband's tea ready. Let the light of their eyes be taken from them, and that perish miserably which alone made a hard world fair, the man must toil to keep body and soul together, the woman must "see to" the husband's scanty meal.

It was not until she heard the blacksmith's heavy steps returning that Erica dared indulge her longing to fly the scene.

He passed her without a word at the door, stumbling upon his threshold as he came in. Before Erica closed the door behind her she looked back, and saw that, throwing himself into the chair set for him, he had flung his head upon the table, and with his arms clasped over his neck, and his great shoulders heaving, was sobbing amid the preparations for the homely meal.

She waited until the wife, looking upon the startling spectacle for a minute in the silence of fear, drew near

and laid a trembling hand upon her husband's back—then, with a sigh of relief, but choked anew with sobs, the girl turned and fled.

At dinner that night—such poor apology as they had for dinner in the disorganized household, where the female servants considered it incumbent on them, having due regard to the tragedy which had been enacted in their midst, to lose their heads and neglect their ordinary functions; and where Hallett, the indispensable, credited now, at the last moment, with a secret attachment to Penny, had cried himself into a jelly, and could not be produced—Erica had not appeared. Her head ached—her father must excuse her, she had sent word.

So that Barty and Harcourt and Dicky had partaken of that ill-cooked, ill-served apology for a meal alone.

"Dear me! we miss Eric," her father had said. "Now that Eric is going, I hope the other men will be coming back soon. We shall miss the dear child very much, Barty."

To which Barty, who had listened with cynical indifference to the same remark a hundred times before, made no more reply than he had ever done.

To which Harcourt also listened, the dark eyes, burning in his pale and handsome face, shifting uneasily from one man to the other, settling with an intensity of

jealousy and suspicion in their glitter upon Barty's red, unconscious features.

Neither at breakfast the next morning did Miss Birch appear.

She was a well-grown, well-furnished young woman, of a fine figure and healthy appearance, despite the clear paleness of her round cheek; but she was not of a constitution of steel, nor had she a nerve of iron. She was, indeed, as one born out of her proper time. In the universal fitness of things, she should have belonged to the age of our grandmothers, when nerves were a sign of gentility; when a woman who was not afraid of a thunderstorm, a tipsy man, and horned cattle would have been ashamed of herself; when the violent exertions of the present day—tennis, cricket, gymnastics—would have been deemed not only dangerous, but indelicate.

The events of the day before had given poor Erica a sleepless night; that in its turn had resulted in a headache, and a feeling of prostration and weariness, which—especially as she did not wish to descend—justified her in keeping upstairs.

Barty opened his letters and the newspaper that lay by his plate, wearing a certain air of expectancy the while, which had nothing to do with that usually all-engrossing occupation, and which by no means escaped Lucian Harcourt, sitting opposite, who, indeed,

watched Barty, for his part, as closely as Barty watched the door.

Once the latter's gaze was drawn to Harcourt, regarding him, with his vividly expressive face, in a somewhat disconcerting fashion. For a long minute Barty quietly met the look, which the other man endeavoured to convert into an indifferent stare. The attempt was a failure, and he knew it. In spite of himself, he felt impelled to speech.

"What do you keep looking at the door for, Barty?" he inquired, his tone as hostile as his glance.

"What is that to you, Harcourt?" the other retorted, with an irritating indifference to the restless torment plainly written on the opposite face.

"Nothing—it is nothing to me!" Harcourt cried with an agonizing effort, after the other man's contemptuous calm. "All that you do is less than nothing. Only, if you should be looking for Miss Birch, you are not likely to see her. That is all."

Barty regarded him unmoved across his lightly-clasped hands, his elbows on the table.

"Perhaps I am anxious for Hallett and the muffins," he said.

Harcourt laughed a little wildly, throwing back his head.

"Oh, if it's only Hallett!" he said; "if it had

chanced to be the other person, I happen to know that she is not intending to appear this morning."

"I dare say you know very little about it," Barty said deliberately, shifting his cool stare.

He took a pencil from his pocket, and tore half a sheet from one of his morning's letters, wrote a few lines thereon, folded the sheet, and rang the bell.

"Give that to Miss Birch's maid," he said to Hallett, who, very wild of eye and mouth, appeared. "Tell her to ask Miss Birch to be good enough to send me an answer at once."

After that, with an ignoring of Harcourt's presence which, to that gentleman's hyper-sensitive nature, must have appeared very like an intentional insult, Barty proceeded leisurely with his meal, glancing down the columns of his newspaper as he consumed his tea and grilled ham, as unconscious of as he was superbly indifferent to the glare of hatred with which he was regarded.

He was so really unconscious that, when—in spite of himself, for he had striven desperately to be self-contained—Harcourt spoke, he looked up, startled.

"Did you mean to convey to me, Mr. Barty, that you did not believe what I told you?"

"Convey to you——? What are you talking about?"

"Did you presume to think I was lying to you, when I condescended to give you that information just now?"

"I did not think about you."

"You did not? I'm beneath your notice, I suppose? Too small and insignificant for such a fine fellow as you to see? Wait. Perhaps I am not so readily ignored; perhaps I was made for other things than to be trampled beneath your feet. If I am contemptible in appearance, and accursed in my birth—you said my mother was a mad-woman, Barty; you said it! I swear before God I heard you; and as there is a heaven above us you shall pay for it—perhaps you will find I shall not make a contemptible enemy."

He stopped, panting, exhausted, his lip trembling, his clenched hands laid on the table quivering.

Barty gathered his letters together, and got up from the table.

"Pooh, my dear fellow! Don't be an ass," he said in his ordinary, placid tones. "That kind of theatrical rubbish may do for a parcel of women, Harcourt, who might be impressed by it; there is no reason that I should be bored by listening to such hysterical twaddle."

Harcourt was on his feet also, and glaring across the table.

"You shall listen to what I like," he cried, trembling, "and as long as I like! I say—do you hear me, sir?—that you took an unwarrantable liberty in writing to Miss Birch. There has been nothing between you to justify your doing that. You did it to raise my blood

—to insult me. I swear you don't do that with impunity. Do you suppose I have ice in my veins, as you have? Have I a stone instead of a heart in my breast?"

"I don't know what your internal organization may be—I know that you are a stupendous ass, and that suffices," Barty said. "I had no intention to insult you. It would not interest me in the least to quarrel with you. I don't propose to do so, having other things—and pleasanter—to occupy me just now."

As he spoke, he put out his hand and took from the tray which Hallett was extending to him the slip of paper which Erica had sent in reply to his note.

There was only a word written thereon, but Harcourt could not see that, and Barty certainly looked at the scrap of paper longer than was necessary to decipher the one clearly-written word. Then very slowly and thoughtfully he folded the slip and put it into his waistcoat pocket. He stood with his back to the younger man as he did so, having halted against him on his way to the door.

"She has written to you?" Harcourt asked, speaking the words very low, in a choked whisper.

"Oh yes, she has written. Why not?"

And then the door had opened and Dicky Birch, very fresh and handsome and smiling from his morning bath, had come in.

“Morning, my dear fellows. Barty, I got up an hour earlier, old man, to see you start. Erica not down yet? Harcourt—hallo! you are looking uncommonly seedy. If you’re intending to operate on the spiced beef, why, turn the knife, dear boy, turn the knife. It’s an awkward plan to hold the carver dagger-fashion, eh?”

CHAPTER XI.

GOOD-BYE!

“I AM leaving at eleven o’clock this morning—going Southward with my brother, who is ill. I should like to bid you good-bye before I start. When can you see me?”

That and Hugh Barty’s signature was all which was contained in the missive which the maid who had accompanied Erica from her aunt’s establishment took up to her mistress that morning.

But one word had been entrusted to her in reply—
“Now.”

She waited at the foot of the stairs to conduct Mr. Barty when he came out.

“My mistress will see you in the billiard-room, sir,” she said.

The billiard-room was a room on the second story, which had not been built for the purpose which its name indicated, and was by no means too well suited to it. In her rare visits, most of the male inmates of the house being absent, Erica was accustomed to use this apartment as her occasional sitting-room. She had arranged a couple of folding-screens around a space by the fire, and was, at those rare times when she wished for solitude, very snug indeed there with her work and books.

It was in this small space, shut off from the bare oak boards and the green table and all its accessories, shut in with a soft rug or two, a trio of chairs, a red footstool and a table, that Barty found her.

Erica was neither so ill nor, in spite of the misfortunes of others, so miserable as to be indifferent to her appearance, to which she was not above at all times giving reasonable attention. She had attired herself on this occasion in a garment warm and soft as to texture, delicate as to hue, at once loose, comfortable, and correct as to cut. It indicated, in a manner pleasing to the taste of the fairest invalid, a slight disposition to illness, and a disposition, somewhat less slight but hardly more serious, to coquetry. Some folds of another texture, more lustrous, but not less delicate, and soft to eye and touch, lay loosely at the base of the white throat, and tenderly enclosed at some distance from the wrist the round arm. Her hair, which also was most

soft in texture, if rich in colour, was disposed with more negligence than usual at the nape of her long neck in a manner which, while not unduly insisting on it, was not intended to conceal its luxuriance. Finally, when Barty entered and she sat up in her chair and put out her hand to him, he discovered that neither the sudden brilliant flushing of her face nor its subsequent somewhat enhanced pallor detracted by any means from her beauty.

It was she who first spoke, looking at him with that red signal of welcome in her cheeks, but seriously, without a smile.

“You are going away?” she said. “Is not that sudden?”

“I am going in ten minutes. My movements have generally been uncertain. You—are you suffering now? I have to thank you for letting me see you. I could not leave without seeing you again.”

“No. And there was something which—about which I wanted to speak to you. I was very stupid yesterday—I am ashamed of myself. You must forgive me, but I ought not to be forgiven. I should have helped you—and I was a hindrance—a burden—an idiot—an intolerable nuisance——”

He looked at her in silence, and she shrank back into the recesses of her chair—a big old-fashioned spe-

cimen, with tall back and sides draped in chintz—that her face might be in shadow.

“Were you all that?” Barty asked at length, very slowly. “I think not, but I must contradict you in detail at some future time. Now—time does not wait as I would have it—I must go. I shall see you again before very long?”

“I think not,” she said, and looked up at him with a certain wistful solemnity in her gray eyes. She would have hidden the fact, had that been possible; but this imminent parting was, from her point of view, a very serious matter. “I am not due at Grainge again before next Christmas, even if they can spare me then, and—there is a whole year to Christmas.”

“Ah, but you may be sure that I shall not wait until Christmas,” he said.

The little red wooden stool, which Erica herself had aspinalled in a spare hour, stood by her chair, and Barty bent one knee upon it and put out his hand.

“And now—good-bye,” he said.

As she made no movement of the hand that lay half hidden in the long folds of her dress, he took it and held it closely clasped.

“You will be glad to see me when I come again?” he asked her very softly, half whispering the words, his eyes upon her face as she shrank from him with a half-girlish shyness, not the less charming for its contrast

with her fine figure and habitual air of self-possession. "You will be glad? Say that much to me."

"So glad!"

Then for a moment he bent his head upon the hand he held and softly kissed it.

"I do pray God to bless you and keep you happy. Good-bye," he said, and in an instant more was gone.

And this was Barty—Barty of the cold eye and the colder heart, the unemotional, the indifferent, the cynic!

Erica looked at her hand—the white hand that he had kissed. Her cheek was not pale now, but red—red as a rose; her eyes were shining, her heart beat thick with a moment's intensest joy.

"Oh, I love—I love you," she said, whispering the words aloud, her arms stretched toward the door by which the man had departed.

The sound of her voice breaking the silence startled, shamed her. She turned and hid her head for a minute's space in the recesses of the chintz-covered chair and cried in a rapture of joy and sorrow.

Then, upon the gravel beneath her window, came the sound of wheels, and she knew that the moment of his departure had come. Starting up, she flew from her chair to the window. Ah, there he was—there was Barty! Her heart beat thickly with pride and pain.

She had been anything but proud of her share in the tragedy of yesterday. Her memory was not very

distinct as to much that had taken place, but she had a general impression that her own behaviour had not been such as to commend itself to the sensible, self-contained order of mankind. It had been more a nervous desire to keep out of Mr. Barty's way than the severity of her headache which had kept her a prisoner in her improvised sitting-room. Yet it had not alone been shame at her own delinquencies which she had felt—her thoughts were too much confused for that. And at the sound of Hugh Barty's name on her father's lip, at his footstep, which she knew among all other footsteps, crossing the hall or the gravel beneath her window, an irrepressible throb of joy, of pain, of hope, of fear, would come, and, mounting, stop her breath.

For she had meant all through to stir his apathy, in spite of his history and character. She had intended to be something to him—of more account than just the common herd of women he disliked and despised. She had desired that he should notice her, think about her—hate her, if no other might be—so set was she against his indifference.

And she had seemed to fail—to fail utterly; and that cool unconcern of his was a stinging pain and a reproach. And, lo! it was removed.

She had moved him. His heart was not, after all, stone to all the world save that one fair, foolish woman who had trampled on it. His eyes had not been cold

when he had looked at Erica just now. There had not been much of cynicism or insensibility in the voice which had prayed God to bless her.

He was appearing below now. She must look well upon him. How long—how long would it be before she saw him again? She had known him for little more than a month—a month out of the twenty-three years she had lived. How should she get through the rest of her life, if it must be passed without him?

But it must not. "You may be sure that I shall not wait so long," he had said; and words—oh, words had such new and weighty meanings when Hugh Barty took them on his lips!

There he was—this hero! He looked much younger in his hat, because it hid the bald place on his head, and the scant, sandy crop upon the temples. Not that the deficiency was a defect in Erica's eyes, or that she would have had the big, ugly fellow different by a hair. Her case was too hopeless for that.

Yes; there he was. He had come out buttoning a waterproof cape beneath his chin, for the frost was broken and it was raining. Erica was glad the beautiful hoar-frost, with its memories painful and sweet, had vanished. It was meet that the heavens should weep when Barty went away.

He had shaken hands with her father, laughing over some remark of Dicky's. He was in high good-humour

that morning, and was easily moved to laughter. Dicky, so encouraged, kept on calling small witticisms from the doorstep.

"About the nag I'll write you, Birch," Barty called, and then had seized the reins and mounted to his seat, the mare, always a bad starter, plunging and backing the while.

"Let go!" Barty called to the groom holding the nervously tossing head. "Confound you! let go, I say!"

Then, with a plunge forward, the mare was off at a tearing pace, the groom had scrambled into his place, and, as the drive turned, the shrubbery hid Barty from the eyes that watched.

He had not given a thought to the fact that the billiard-room window looked that way; he had not turned his head to see the gracious figure, clad in its soft dove-coloured robe, standing amid the window-curtains to watch his departure.

But Lucian Harcourt, hidden bare-headed among the rain-drenched shrubs which bordered the drive, had seen, and had ground his teeth and dug the nails of his clenched hands into his flesh as he had seen. Then, turning to follow with straining eyes the disappearing dog-cart, he had frantically cursed its driver.

CHAPTER XII.

POISON OF ADDERS.

ON the day following Barty's departure the inquest on Penelope Bye was held; and Erica found, to her dismay, that she was called on to give evidence as to the finding of the body.

When the sad business was over, and the unfortunate girl had been removed, in her coffin, to the blacksmith's house, there to await burial, Miss Birch had declared herself too upset to travel for a day or so, and had retired again to the privacy of her screen-enclosed space in the billiard-room. She did not care to go below—to confront Barty's empty chair, to miss his voice, his step coming into the room. It was pleasanter to be by herself where she had last seen him; to think out her own thoughts uninterrupted by the commonplaces of the rest of the world.

She reproached herself now and again for her unwonted self-indulgence. She really ought to go down for her father's sake, she said, lying back comfortably in her chair, with no real intention of stirring. For how flat, stale, and unprofitable the whole proceedings must be in the nether regions just now, where Dicky laughed

and talked in his usual cheery, irresponsible fashion; where Harcourt—irksome little man!—glared and nursed his ridiculous vanity and his wrongs; where Barty's voice, Barty's big presence, were absent!

He had not been used to talk much. It was Erica who had talked, Erica told herself, not without shame, thinking always over the hours and days of the past few weeks; chattering to Barty, if she could rouse him to attention; chattering *at* him to Harcourt, to her father, on those more frequent occasions when he gave no sign of consciousness of her presence. More rarely still had he laughed—never with her: with her father, or at his own thoughts, making some inner comment on what Dicky had said. She had made him smile, though, often, she remembered, smiling triumphantly herself at the past achievement—smile frankly now and then, looking up quickly in her face with that odd glitter in his eyes, of which such cold blue eyes alone are capable; smile oftener against his will, his gaze upon the table-cloth, the sandy moustache pulled down. Ah, Erica could recall exactly the expression!

From this foolish theme she persisted continually in bringing back her thoughts, forcing them to dwell upon the tragedy which had unfolded itself in their midst. She recalled poor Penny as she—an older child herself—first remembered her: the pretty, bright-haired child in the Sunday-school and the choir; the fast-growing

girl, turning, all unsuspected by herself, into a beauty, delighted to wear out "Miss Eric's" left-off dresses. She thought of Penny as she had seen her on her return, little more than a month ago, promoted from housemaid in one of the neighbouring farm-houses to parlour-maid at the Hall. How lightly they had noticed among themselves the girl's pretty looks, and had thought no more of her and her possible temptations and troubles and difficulties!

Yet Erica told herself that she should have had more consideration. Had not she surprised the girl more than once in tears? She recalled what she had utterly forgotten until the recollection came back to her with a reproachful stab—that Christmas Eve when the weeping girl had brushed against her on the threshold of the gun-room where Hugh Barty had been run to earth; and she, Erica, had passed her by, and talked and chattered and laughed over stupid jokes, unknowing that she spent her thoughtless, happy days cheek by jowl with despair.

How terrifying had been that sight in the bare plantation! If *he* had not been there, might not Erica, too, have died of exceeding horror? (Here her thoughts, running into a more pleasant channel, were conscientiously pulled up again.) Ah, wretched Penelope! through what an agony must she have lived in those last days! Yet Erica remembered that the girl had

given no sign; she had answered the bell; had laid the cloth; had helped to wait at table. She had smiled, pleased as a child, when a few days ago the earth had been found to have covered itself with a light, powdery snow during the night, and had volunteered to her young mistress the remark that the trees "did look beautiful, certainly, that morning." Well, the poor eyes had taken their last look of earthly skies through whitened branches!

What a horrid detail in the ghastly story, by the way, was the fact of the suicide having been committed with the razor taken from Barty's room! Erica found her mind dwelling on that point since she had heard it for the first time this morning with morbid interest. Why had Penny picked on that? Had it been chosen by accident or design? She herself was in that state of mind when it is impossible to imagine the all-absorbing interest failing to be an interest elsewhere. No one in touching Hugh Barty's belongings could help experiencing the thrill which their contact gave. His razor, even in such a supreme moment, could not have been only a knife borrowed for a horrible and lawless purpose. The distracted girl must have felt above the pain of the wound that it was Barty's knife which was putting an end to her ruined life!

Had Barty himself known about that razor? In that short interview she had held with him, of which she

could recall so easily every word, it had not been Penelope of whom he had spoken. It had——

But there her mind fastened gladly upon the exhaustless subject of Barty's looks and words, and would not be easily shaken off.

And then the door had opened, and Lucian Harcourt had come in.

Erica looked up with annoyance, for, beside that she was so much in love with her own company just then, this young man of the heated brain and too sensitive skin had begun to weary her exceedingly.

"Do not look on me in the light of an intruder," he said, coming to a stand at her chair, and bending his head before her. "I was longing to see you, and I have risked your displeasure, and have come."

"If you wanted me you were right to come, of course," she said, and managed to smile at him, in spite of her inner grievance.

"I have been sorry to hear of your illness," he went on; "but I know that you were not too ill to admit Mr. Barty——"

She looked the tiresome young man in the face with a slight flush upon her own; she had not approved of the tone or the taste of that last remark.

"I certainly saw Mr. Barty for a minute," she said indifferently. "He came to bid me good-bye."

Harcourt, having gazed back at her in silence, and

with blazing eyes, suddenly walked over to the window, pulled aside the curtain, and looked down upon the shrubbery and the gravel sweep beneath.

"I saw you yesterday," he said; "you were watching him drive away."

Then he threw the curtain from him, and went back to her, placing himself again directly in front of her.

"He did not know that you were there," he said—"the animal! the insensible pig! If I had been in his place, I should have known in every fibre that you were watching me."

"Oh, that is nonsense!" Erica said sharply. "How many times lately have I told you that you are not to talk nonsense to me, Mr. Harcourt?"

"It is nonsense to dream of putting myself in Barty's place, I suppose? I never can do that—I never shall have the joy of feeling you look at me as you looked at him. Unless I am present with you, forcing your attention with the outpourings of my wretched soul, you do not spare a thought to me."

"All that is so idle, Mr. Harcourt. What does it signify about my thoughts? Pray—pray what makes you imagine I watched Mr. Barty as he drove away?"

"I know, because I saw you," he said, dropping his voice. He sat himself down on that little footstool upon which Barty for a minute had knelt, and which Erica had since kept by her side, and leaning forward, while

she drew back from him, he looked with his brilliant eyes into her face. "I was among the shrubs there, below, and I watched you. I watch you constantly," he said. "I never tire."

"But supposing I do not like to be watched?"

"I never tire. I would shut my eyes gladly—for ever—to every other earthly sight, if only they might have always before them—your face. You have kept away from me lately. It does no good; it might do infinite harm. Then I thirst for the sight of you and the sound of your voice and the soft rustling of your dress, and then—then I can bear no more, and you see I come to you."

"You have such a strange, exaggerated way of saying things! I know that you do not mean half of all this; but yet I would rather not hear it—if we are to keep friends, I will not hear it."

"Exaggerate? Not mean all I say?" he repeated, with his soft, quick utterance, leaning towards her, his elbows on his knees, his slim white hands clasped and strained together beneath his chin. "Do you know that night after night, when you and the rest of the world, except beings so wretched as I—if there are such beings—are asleep and at peace, I walk my room and curse the miserable language that will not let me say 'I love you' as I would say it——"

"Mr. Harcourt, I have asked you to be silent. I will not listen——"

"In my person—my insignificant stature—there is nothing to make such speech ridiculous?"

"No—a thousand times! It is simply that I decline to listen."

"Then you shall listen. Why not? I love you. Since my eyes first fell on you, I have been sick of love for you. I do think that for love of you I shall die. All the paltry things I cared for before you came to me—all my grovelling hopes and vulgar ambitions and stupid, coarse joys—all that has faintly seemed to please my eyes and satisfy my sense—my work, my food, my drink, the weary round of every day—I loathe them all. I loathe them! The world means only you! The day is you; the night only hides you from me. Those nights! My God! each one is a hell to me! How many is it, do you think, since I have slept? If you knew what those dark hours hold for me, Erica, you would pity, if you could not love me. But you shall—you shall love me!"

His eyes were wild; the sallow paleness of his face and lips had whitened ashily; the strong effort which he made to control his features and his voice failed occasionally, his lip distorted itself with painful quivering, and now and again his voice rose wildly.

Erica was fairly frightened. She had known that

the young man was in love with her, but, to say truth, that fact alone had not seriously alarmed or distressed her. It is pretty well borne in upon the feminine mind that the amorous male can take care of himself. The scant mercy which is shown to her, woman deals out very cheerfully in return, and with an easy conscience, for her part. Erica's experience to some extent excused her father's high opinion of her powers of fascination. So many youths had fallen in love with her—with her fine figure, and fair, round, happy face, with the deep gray eyes and the rich brown hair—and nothing more than so many quickly-cured heart-aches had resulted. She had been quite careless of what small mischief she had done, and had gone on her way rejoicing. But if she had sown the wind, she had reaped the whirlwind now.

She tried to rise to her feet, but he was quicker than she, and gripped her arm. What an unexpected strength there was in the small, lithe hand! He held her wrist, and, with his other arm laid across the arms of her chair, quite easily kept her prisoner.

"You shall love me," he went on, the low rapid utterance becoming almost unintelligible in his excitement. "You shall, because so fervently I desire it. Sooner or later I have my will—always. There is a power within me—a power over men and women to force them to my will. You have noticed that? I can

overcome all obstacles; nothing stops me. I grasp the thing I long for; there is nothing in heaven or hell I fear. Hell? I know the worst hell can do for me. Heaven? Erica, you are mine—you are mine——”

Erica was astonished and frightened. She was not without experience, as has been said; but it was not exactly after such fashion that the other victims of her charms had expressed their adoration.

“Will you take away your hands, Mr. Harcourt, and get upon your feet?” she said, striving to hide how ill at ease she felt under a not very successful air of dignity. “I cannot stay with you if you continue to talk so madly.”

“Madly!” he repeated. The word influenced him as none other she could have chosen would have done. To her relief, he let go her hands and sprang to his feet. “I know whom I have to thank for throwing that word in my teeth,” he said. “By Heaven, I’ll thank him before long!”

Erica, too, had quickly risen; she looked down upon him now, too angry to be afraid.

“You are forgetting yourself; you have no right to use threats in my presence. Who do you mean?” she asked—but she knew.

“I mean Hugh Barty,” he said—“as Hugh Barty will find to his cost.”

“I am happy to say that I do not understand you.”

"Did you understand him when he told you that my mother had been a maniac? That was a lie, mind you; but what was that to him? About such a wretched creature as I any lie may be spoken, I suppose! Wait; we will see."

"Mr. Harcourt, any thoughtless words which—anyone—may have spoken——"

"He spoke them to injure me in your eyes; but for that—but for that—he might have lied till his tongue fell powerless, and I would have met him only with contempt; now—now——"

He drew a step nearer, and dropped his voice again to the low, quick, uncertain utterance which was to her a new feature of his always excitable manner.

"Now, there is a thing or two I have to say—questions to ask: answer them, leave them—it is all one. They answer themselves—they won't be left: Erica, was it love of Shadrach Bush which drove a handsome girl like Penelope to suicide? Was it for the desertion of such a hind as that that she went about red-eyed with weeping? Could such boorish ignorance as his cause a woman's heart to beat—much more to break? Do you know why Bush did not marry her when she asked him? He gave the reason at the inquest to-day, and he was not believed. But I believed him. Do you know why Hugh Barty, who never leaves his shooting and his hunting at this time of year, who had, beside, the attraction

of your presence to keep him here—do you know why, at a moment's notice, he must leave the country? Must get away, at all hazards, before the inquest on the girl's body? Do you know what weapon she chose to destroy herself? Can you guess if she saw a fitness in that——?”

He stopped, breathless, livid of face, quivering.

Erica stood before him, white, erect, scornful.

“You are wishing to inform me that Mr. Barty was Penny Bye's murderer, perhaps?” she said, her anger ringing and trembling through her voice.

“I have not used that word,” he said quickly; “it is an ugly word—I would not use it. Beside, you heard the verdict? Suicide: you have not forgotten? I would not accuse him of that; no, no—of nothing that cannot be proved. But he was her *lover*! and I have sworn that you should know it.”

“And you think, for a moment, that I should believe it?” Erica said, lifting her head. “You—you come to me and blacken the name of a man with whom you have lived as a friend! In—my father's house you slander one whom—my father loves! You dare—dare to speak to me of love with that lie on your lips! Go! I hate you—hate, despise you! Go!”

But Harcourt, with a sound like a hoarse and tearless sob, flung himself upon his knees beside her and caught at her hand.

"Forgive me," he said wildly; "you shall forgive me. My brain is on fire—I don't know what I say. Forgive me."

"You acknowledge that what you said is a lie?"

"A lie that Barty left the country on the day of the inquest? That her throat was cut with Barty's razor? I will say that those are lies if you will be good to me—if you will not hate me."

"It is a lie that he was—he was her—lover?"

He bowed his face upon the hand to which he was clinging and covered it with kisses.

"It is a lie—since you wish it to be so. Yes. And I am forgiven? You will be merciful to me——"

But just then, to her intense relief, he was compelled to let go her hand to get upon his feet, for her father's step was heard outside, and Birch's voice cheerfully calling his daughter's name.

With a lifting of the eyebrows and an expressive dragging down of the lip, Dicky Birch regarded the visitor in his daughter's room.

"Harcourt!" he said. "My dear boy, you were not aware that Miss Birch came here for quiet, perhaps? Too much society can't be good for a person suffering from headache, Harcourt. You, who are something of a doctor, should know that."

Harcourt bit the lip that still quivered in tell-tale fashion; he gazed on the intruder with a look of anything rather than welcome upon his ashen face.

"I called in to inquire about Miss Birch's headache, and I am going to leave her," he said, and bowed to Erica without looking at her, and withdrew.

Dicky laid his hand upon his daughter's shoulder.

"Isn't that a little—eh?" he inquired, with delicate brows still raised. "You and Harcourt shut up here—alone, you know—eh? And Aunt Eliza? We shall certainly be having Aunt Eliza about us."

Erica laughed unsteadily.

"Oh, dear daddy, only take your Mr. Harcourt and do something with him—shut him up, bury him—anything, so that for the rest of the time I am here I am free of him!" she said.

CHAPTER XIII.

"CONSCIENCE DOTH MAKE COWARDS OF US ALL."

AFTER that it seemed to Erica that she never could bear to sit in her comfortable nook over the billiard-room fire again. During the few days she remained at Flint Hall she spent most of her time in her bedroom; but she had no more happiness in solitude. Harcourt—not for a moment would she believe that hateful thing which Harcourt had said, but he had managed to poison those pleasant thoughts of hers. Not for a moment would she believe—but the fact of the suggestion

had been abhorrent: she could not rid her mind of it; the hideous idea haunted her persistently, drive it from her as she would.

On the morning of the day on which she left Grainge she went to the blacksmith's house to say a few words of sympathy and farewell to Penelope Bye's mother.

In any case she would have gone, because she had a very tender and pitiful heart, which had been deeply touched by the sorrow of that humble household. Because she was ready to blame herself that she had been too careless and self-engrossed to interest herself in the pretty girl, going about her duties uncomplainingly, quiet and unobtrusive and methodical in all she did, with that load of trouble and despair upon her heart. Because in the background of her mind, unacknowledged to herself, there lurked the feeling that the sight of Mrs. Bye herself—poor homely, common-place blacksmith's wife—would dispel for ever that haunting suggestion about the blacksmith's daughter.

So, accompanied by her maid—for she dreaded lest Harcourt might seek another interview with her—she went.

The blacksmith was hammering a bar of hot iron as Erica passed the forge. The sparks flew up merrily in the keen air; the blows rang with a cheerful sound. Across

the intervening yard, where the long grass grew green, Mrs. Bye, standing by her back door, threw food to half a score of hens, which hopped and flew and loudly quarrelled with each other at her feet. There was a cheerfulness about the scene which struck upon Erica as a wrong done to Penelope—to poor Penny, lying deaf of ear and idle for ever somewhere behind that open door.

Leaving her maid to keep company with the poultry, Erica went into the clean, bare kitchen. Mrs. Bye clung tenaciously to the kind hand which had been held out to her.

"She's in there," she said, putting her apron to her lips, and "making a face" over her weeping, in the artless, childish fashion of the poor. "I couldn't seem to bear to put her i' the out-house, miss: Penny were allus so afeared o' th' rats that lay there. I ha' set to and cleaned my pantry for her. 'Twere a sight o' trouble, but I weren't never afeared o' work, lucky for all on us; and there she be, nice and handy. I said to my husband, maybe you'd come and take a last look on her, as you were so set on the po'r girl."

Erica had not thought of the possibility of having to look upon that saddest sight again; she had not lived enough among them to understand the etiquette of such matters as observed by the class of the Byes. She began hurriedly to make excuse; rather than gaze

upon that awful face again—awful in its beauty and its woe—Erica decided that she would ignominiously run away.

But she was spared this extreme measure for the present; for Mrs. Bye, administering a parting squeeze to the hand, and with a loud sigh dropping the apron from her lips, suddenly moved away, and, with something of mystery in the action, turned the key in the lock of the door they had entered.

"There's something I'm wishful to show you first," she said, in a loud whisper, "only I don't want him to know," nodding in the direction of the unconscious blacksmith hammering at his anvil. "He were fond of his gal, but he have a wonnerful hard way o' lookin' at matters as some folk make not much account on; so I ha' kep' it to myself. But you, that was that wrapt up in her, and found the p'or dear, that might ha' laid there till the thow come but for your a-chancin' on her like—I thought as how, maybe, I'd show it to you, if so be as you was to come."

By this, with trembling hand, she had dived into the pocket of her gown, and had therefrom produced a letter, which, drawing from its envelope, she now laid in Miss Birch's hand.

"That come t'other day, i' the mornin'," she explained, in the loud, hoarse whisper. "I should ha' got it before, but the anvelope, you can see for yerself,

weren't wrote in her best writin', po'r dear! By the marks on it, that have been a-travellin' about."

The paper laid in Erica's hand was very soiled, blotted and crumpled.

"Fare to me, she'd carried it for long in her pocket, thinkin' as how she might be druv to send it, and puttin' of it off," Mrs. Bye said, with her shaking red finger laid upon the page. "There ain't no day o' the week, nor nothin', put to it, ye see. That warn't for no want o' know, nayther. Penny, she were up to all the dodges wi' letter-writin'."

"DEAR MOTHER," the letter ran, in a very fine and scratchy, but legible, hand—"I am driven to bid you and dear father good-bye, and I shall not trubble you anny more. Dear mother, don't ask about me, nor yet try to find me. I am best out of the way. And, my dear parents, if father blame shady bush for this, he is in the wrong. 'tis a Gentleman, dear mother, that gave Broke my Hart. Dear mother, I don't name no names, as I love him still; and so, dear Parents, you will see me no more, for I dare not face father, and so Farewel, from your unhappy, lost PENNY."

The paper shook in Erica's hand; her face, which had flushed a painful crimson, was as suddenly white to the lips; such a light of anger and disgust as had never shone in their soft depths before blazed in her eyes. She hastily pushed the miserable lines into Mrs. Bye's hand.

"You were not justified in keeping that back," she said, and her voice was pitiless and hard and clear. "It should have been read at the inquest."

"My dear, that never come, as I ha' been a-tellin' on yer, till after the inkwitch," Mrs. Bye said, momentarily forgetful in her eagerness and sorrow of the respect due to a member of the "quality." "And another thing," she went on, laying a hand upon Erica's sleeve, and dropping her voice again, "I don't want him to get hold on't. He've been a good father in's way, but he han't allus a control of hisself when his blood's up. And, miss, 'tis one o' yer young gentlemen up to the House—I don't make no manner o' doubt o' that—p'or led-away gal! And your pa, he have employed Bye a sight o' year—and folks who've got to arn their bread have got to remember who's their friend—and I don't want to have no piece o' work——"

Erica's heart was sick within her. Harcourt had not lied. In a flash there came to her the recollection of the girl she had encountered going weeping from Barty's presence; the fact of the weapon with which the deed was done having been his appeared in startling significance. Shame and disgust and anger and pain raged within her. She shook off the woman's detaining hand. What was her affliction to Erica? What was she but the mother of the shameful creature who had dared——

"It is your duty to show that letter," she said. She turned to the door without a word of farewell, but it was locked. She shook it. "Open the door!" she said, in a voice with which she had never addressed mortal before.

Mrs. Bye, in astonishment, laid her hand upon the lock.

"There ain't no offence, sure-ly?" she said. "You and yer pa may be sure there'll be no piece o' work. And you beant goin' without a sight o' my p'or girl—there's, I may say, scores ha' come to look their last on her. She lay quite handy——"

"I will see her," Erica said.

All at once a longing had come upon her to see her—this wretched *thing* that Barty had loved and thrown aside; this miserable blacksmith's daughter, who had dared—dared to love Hugh Barty to the last!

Her anger had driven all the shrinking from her soul. She was hard as stone, as with firm step and head held high, and cruelly disdainful lip, she followed Penelope's mother into the damp-smelling, fresh-scrubbed little pantry where Penelope lay.

"I ha' done by her as well as I could afford," Mrs. Bye said, with a kind of proud humility in her words. "Me and a neighbour sat up all night a-makin' her shroud. Tha's an *expensive* bit o' flannel, as you'll see for yerself, miss; but I meant my po'r gal to have the

best while she's above ground. After that, the Lord must see to her——"

The apron was at Mrs. Bye's trembling lips again. The words came mingled with weeping.

That dreadful gash, which had been effectual to the letting out of poor Penny's spoilt life, was decently hidden. The golden hair, smooth and thick, lay shining down each marble cheek. In the cold hands, folded upon the breast, a bunch of white primulas, plucked from a plant in the cottage window, lay. How could Erica—Erica the tender and the pitiful—looking upon such a sight, remember the anger in her heart?

For a space she stood with fixed eyes, trying to grasp the fact that this—this white, awful image, with its dread unlikeness to any living thing—was Penny! Penny, who had smiled upon her, welcoming her home! Penny, with the dimpled, healthy face, the ready blush, the quivering lid and lip. This mask!

This was not the woman who had been forward and bold and weak? who had sought and won the admiration of a *gentleman* to her bitter cost? This—beyond the pale of human pity, and yet so infinitely pitiable; this unfamiliar form of chillness, with the white flowers upon its breast!

Erica looked at the hands upon the flowers, and thought of the last thing they had held in life—the still, waxen hands that had been so awfully rash—she

looked at the strange, unearthly face; and of a sudden all that hardness, so unfamiliar to her heart, broke up, and, covering her face with her hands, she broke into a passion of weeping.

Mrs. Bye's sobbing, repressed till then, grew louder in sympathy.

"Lay yer hand on her, po'r dear," the mother said. "Ye'll maybe dream of her else."

Erica, trembling, shrinking, drew off her glove and touched the icy hands that held the flowers.

"She wished to keep—his—secret," she said brokenly, turning streaming eyes upon the poor mother. "Let her keep it. Do not make inquiries; do not speak of it. Let her keep it."

It was for Penelope's sake alone she made that request, Erica thought; in pity for her mother's sorrow, and with no notion of urging her secrecy, that she drew from her purse the five-pound note her father had given, with many apologies for the smallness of the sum, that morning to pay her expenses back to town. She had money enough to serve that purpose without the five pounds, and Aunt Eliza had a liberal hand——

"It will help to pay for the funeral," Erica said; "and—and I will remember you from time to time—and good-bye."

So she left; Mrs. Bye weeping more bitterly than ever when she went away, to show to her own heart,

perhaps, that she was not, for five pounds and a promise of future benefits, capable of experiencing the "shame of compensated grief."

And all through that short winter's day there came visitors to gaze upon the silent occupant of Mrs. Bye's pantry, to gaze with that common instinct of curiosity upon the silent lips which, could they open, might divulge those tremendous "mysteries which heaven will not have earth to know."

When the evening came on, and the men had given over work, had eaten their supper, and "cleaned themselves up," quite a posse of them gathered silently in Mrs. Bye's kitchen, and were shown by her into the pantry, lighted by a small unshaded lamp, with its empty shelves, and the coffin standing on trestles in its midst.

The women who had stood around earlier in the day had been by no means overpowered by grief or awe. They had cried and sighed and talked; had examined the texture of the flannel shroud; had eagerly pointed out to each other in what the features had altered since the day before. The eyes were more sunken, they had declared; the jaw had a little fallen. Did not Mrs. Bye "obsarve" that the hue of the face was changing? Their husbands and sons stared stolidly upon the silent figure beneath the ugly glare of the lamp in an awkward silence. They had known the

girl from her childhood, sat next her in school, walked with her to church, called their heavy jokes to her from cottage door or over garden paling, as she passed by.

And while they stood there holding their hats in their hands, each wishing that his neighbour would make the start, but not liking himself to be the first to turn his back and shuffle out of the door, each feeling that silence oppressive he did not know how appropriately to break, there came a loud knocking upon the outer door.

Mrs. Bye, her head heavy with protracted talking and weeping, but ever busy and alert, walked through the kitchen and opened the door.

With the darkness a heavy rain had come on; the wind was howling. From the blackness of the dismal night a white face shone out.

"Good Lord! what is it?" the woman cried, starting back; and Harcourt, pushing her on one side, darted into the kitchen and shut the door upon the storm, as if it had been his enemy, and had pursued him.

"It is I, Lucian Harcourt," he said in a whisper. "I have come to see her before I sleep."

They made way for him about the coffin, each in silence raising a finger to his forehead; but he took no notice of them all. He placed himself at the side of

the coffin and gazed, white-faced, at the ghastly face before him.

As Mrs. Bye looked at him standing there—the slight figure of him looking unusually slight in his clinging rain-drenched garments, the brilliant eyes, fixed on her daughter's face, seeming ready to leap from their sockets in the intentness of their gaze—a hard light dawned in her own eyes.

"There she lay—my Penny, sir," she said. "And she weren't the less *murdered*, mind, because she done the deed with her own hand. She weren't the less murdered," she repeated, looking away from him to the stolid faces around.

Harcourt had not, apparently, heard. With a dreadful concentration in the act, he was gazing—gazing.

One of the men made a motion to turn away. He felt himself compelled, by the exigencies of the occasion, to reluctant speech as he did so.

"Po'r gal!" he said; "pity she di'n't let on to no one 'bout her troubles. But she kep' 'em to herself, like—she kep' 'em to herself."

"And the dead tell no tales," Harcourt said suddenly.

"She was murdered," Mrs. Bye repeated, with her eyes, grown blurred and expressionless through many tears, upon him. "She done it herself, as the inkwitch laid it down; but she weren't none the less murdered."

"Don't they say," Harcourt demanded in a loud, startling voice, but without moving his eyes—"don't they say no murderer dares touch the body of his victim, lest the blood begin again to flow? I suppose, among these good fellows here, there is no man afraid to put himself to that test."

He had not moved his eyes from their fascinated gaze; his face was as ghastly as the face of the corpse. After a moment's silence his hand crept slowly over the coffin side, slowly over the quiet breast, and fastened with a spasmodic clutch upon the hand which held the flowers.

Then those who watched him saw a sudden awful change come upon his face. Its yellowish pallor turned to a livid hue, the staring eyes protruded, the mouth fell open. With a wild, inarticulate cry, with a gesture as if force were necessary to free it, he pulled away his hand. Gasping, with a foam upon his lip, he fell back against the wall.

"My God!" he said, "she gripped my hand!"

Panting, labouring for breath, he looked around upon the suddenly blanched faces of the men with a hideous terror upon his own. They made way for him as he blindly staggered a few steps forward, hesitated, swayed for a moment, and fell forward, crashing upon the threshold of the blacksmith's door.

PART II.

CHAPTER I.

HUGH BARTY KEEPS HIS WORD.

So Erica Birch, leaving Grainge with its pleasant, sad and terrible memories behind her, went back to the protecting care of Aunt Eliza, and the conventionality and comfort and safety of Aunt Eliza's handsome home.

From this woman, kind and wise and loving, who had more than filled for Erica the place of that unhappy mother whom she but faintly remembered, the girl since her childhood had had no secrets. For Mrs. Perry had been friend and confidante to her, as well as protector and adviser.

During the remainder of that last day at Grainge, during the hours of her homeward journey, there had been present with Erica, accompanying that strangely new, yet wearingly familiar pain in her heart, and making it bearable, the thought of how she would pour the tale, which lay with such a burden upon her spirit, into Mrs. Perry's ears. She mentally fashioned the phrases she would use, and longed in her soreness for

the comfort of the attention and the sympathy and the quick comprehension which awaited her.

Sitting, teacup in hand, and with loosened wraps, over the fire in her own bedroom, immediately on her return she had begun her narrative; and had then discovered, with a heavier pain in her heart, that that part of the tale of which she had most longed to unburden herself she could not bring her lips to relate.

It was easy to be seen that the girl had sustained a shock; that her nerves—never very strong nerves—had been unstrung; that a deep, most regrettable impression had been made upon the happy gaiety of her days. All that was apparent to the most casual observer; and Mrs. Perry, having listened in almost perfect silence to so much of the painful recital as had been vouchsafed her—having marked the eyes filling with nervous, unshed tears, the quivering lip, and round cheek paling and flushing—thought it better to recur to the subject no more. It was a pitiful, ugly tale, although common enough. Poor Eric's involuntary share in it had been as unfortunate as painful. It was grievous that anything so shameful and so tragic should have touched, for one instant, with its grim shadow the happy, sunny-hearted, warmly-sheltered girl.

But Mrs. Perry, being a wise as well as a sympathetic woman, knew the preciousness of silence on themes that are best forgotten. She knew how, with

change and cheerful society, the most vivid impressions fade on the young mind, the most painful memories grow dim and slip to the background of the thought. She knew how each day's petty details choke the soon-filled soul; how we, most happily for us, "forget because we must, and not because we will." She therefore treated the story as Erica told it as lightly as she could, and, for her part, asked no questions, nor spoke of the subject again.

And nevertheless, as time went on, it was evident that Erica's mind was more retentive than Mrs. Perry had hoped. To work the change in her that was evident only to Aunt Eliza's loving eyes, it was clear that Erica's nervous system must have received a very serious shock indeed.

But although the subject of Penelope's death was therefore tabooed between the ladies, Mrs. Perry knew of no reason why she should not satisfy her always eager curiosity with regard to the details of her brother's *ménage*. She regarded the household at Grainge with a kind of pious horror and a terrible interest. A house with a lot of men doing as they liked; no woman to keep them in order, and to regard the proprieties! Smoking going on throughout the house; the drawing-room shut up, left to moth and mildew; dogs sprawling on once-costly cushions and rugs; breakfast so late that it merged into lunch; dinner served at the

discretion of the servants; drinks coming off at all hours of the day! It was a terrible subject, but fascinating, too; and Aunt Eliza was never tired of pursuing it. Incidentally, of course, the names of Barty and of Lucian Harcourt had to be mentioned; but, in the new reticence which Erica had developed, so lightly were they touched on that Mrs. Perry received no impression of the close intimacy which, during the memorable Christmas holiday, had arisen between her niece and those two of Dicky Birch's men.

She was the more surprised, then, at the piece of intelligence her husband imparted to her, shouting the news from his dressing-room to her in the bedroom adjoining, one evening when he had come home tired and cross, and both were making their toilettes for dinner.

It was about six weeks after Erica's return from Grainge. She also was in her room dressing for a home dinner-party, to which she looked forward with no feeling of interest whatever.

"Erica," her aunt said, coming hurriedly in, her long draperies rustling softly across the pretty, littered bedchamber—"Eric, love, I have news for you. Mr. Hugh Barty is coming to dinner to-night."

Erica's face, as seen in the pier-glass into which she was idly looking, as her maid laced her dress at the

back, was pale to the lips. For a moment she was quite still and silent; then:

“Mr. Barty?” she repeated, in a politely interested tone of inquiry.

“That Barty of your father’s, I suppose—Sir William Barty’s brother. (If Lucy has finished lacing, she can go. I will help you to finish.) I know nothing about it, my dear; your uncle was late, and you know how he hates to be questioned. The man called at his chambers, he said, and of course he had to ask him home. That is all I can get out of him. My dear, what is he coming for?”

Erica shook her head. She walked to the toilette-table and picked up a string of pearls. Mrs. Perry saw that the fingers were shaking.

“Are you going to wear these?” she asked her, her own heart beating with pleased and eager sympathy; and she took the string of pearls and clasped them round the white throat—she had to reach to do so, being a shorter, slighter woman than her niece.

“Eric, of course you do know,” she said softly; “and of course it’s you, love.”

Peeping over the girl’s shoulder, she could see Erica’s white, fair face in the glass, the round soft cheeks that dimpled so easily when she smiled, the rich brown of the luxuriant hair, the dark lashes hiding for a moment the deep, clear eyes. Mrs. Perry’s kind

bosom heaved with a throb of triumph. The girl was beautiful and charming—Aunt Eliza had always known it—and her beauty and her charms had had power to draw to her side this delightfully eligible admirer.

“I thought Mr. Barty was in Tangier,” Erica said. “He went there with his brother, who is ill.”

“Well, he has left the brother who is ill to come to England to dine with your uncle and me, you see,” Mrs. Perry declared playfully. “Monstrously kind of him, I am sure, Erica, especially as we have neither of us set eyes on him in our lives before. Is that all, love? You look very nice. Will you have the flowers in the glass there, or will you keep to the all white?”

“I don’t care about them, Aunt Eliza. I don’t know—I——”

Then Erica broke off and sank into a chair, and twisted her fingers nervously together, and looked up with a troubled, anxious air in her aunt’s face.

“Auntie, dear, I don’t think I will go down to-night,” she said. The tears came to her eyes, and her lip trembled. “I don’t want to meet Mr. Barty, auntie. I wish you could manage it. I wish I might stay up here.”

But this trepidation had only the effect of confirming Mrs. Perry’s conjecture that Barty had come for an interesting, highly commendable purpose. She divined that Erica guessed at this, and with a maidenly modesty,

of which her aunt thoroughly approved, was shy and frightened in consequence.

That her not coming down was entirely out of the question Erica was laughingly assured. But, there being still a half-hour before the guests were expected, she was left for that time in peace and solitude to recover her spirits and courage.

In this she apparently succeeded. When she entered the drawing-room, and Hugh Barty, who had been the first to arrive, went forward from the side of his hostess to greet her, he encountered a young lady of perfect coolness and self-possession, who gave him her hand with a dishearteningly frank and careless smile, and then easily turned aside from him with a laughing word of welcome to her uncle, who, however unpleasant he might occasionally make himself to the rest of the world—not even excepting his own immaculate wife—had always pleasant looks and kindly words for that wife's pretty niece.

Barty was a man whom it would not have been very easy to snub, supposing that any person ever had had the temerity to attempt to perform that operation upon him. In his quiet and unobtrusive bearing, his emotionless talk, his sensibleness and self-restraint, he offered very few points of attack. Yet as he resumed his position by Mrs. Perry's chair, he experienced an

uneasy feeling that he had become acquainted with the unpleasant, hitherto unfamiliar, process.

This disagreeable impression was revived again and again during dinner. It was not that Erica Birch treated him with any lack of politeness—he could have borne that not discouraging form of feminine tactics with more than resignation. She listened graciously when he addressed her, and replied with due courtesy to all that he had to say. It was his inner man that was being snubbed, Barty perceived; it was for the erroneous notions he had ventured to form of her he was being reprimanded; it was his intentions and hopes with regard to her that were suffering rebuke.

It was a not very interesting dinner-party the Perrys were entertaining that night. There were a half-dozen middle-aged couples—the clergyman of the parish, a couple of barristers not quite so successful in their profession as their host, a pair of wealthy solicitors to whom the great Perry, Q. C., felt called on just then to pay some attention.

There was also present a certain old Colonel West, a great friend of Erica's, apparently, by whom she sat at dinner, and for whose benefit she laughed and joked and made her half-foolish, half-witty remarks, after that provoking fashion which Hugh Barty remembered. It was so that she had endeavoured to entertain that gen-

tleman himself in those past days when "Birch's daughter" had, after his phrase, made a "set" at him.

He was very much out of it now, certainly, although the Perrys were disposed to make much of him, and their guests were agreeably inclined and talkative. He made an effort or two to detach Erica, who sat beside him, from her devoted attention to the ex-military gentleman, who called her by her Christian name, and who might have been her grandfather, whom she seemed to have known from babyhood and to see every day of her life, and who could not surely have been so excessively attractive.

She listened and replied to his inquiries for her father, smilingly answered his demand for Grainge news with a good-humoured but scanty report, and was back with her Colonel again, teasing him to give her a certain name it pleased that gentleman teasingly to withhold.

From the fragments of their conversation which reached his ears, Barty unwillingly gathered that someone had confided his opinion of the charms of Erica Birch to the bosom of her friend, the Colonel. This opinion had something to do with a comparison which had been made—very much, of course, in Erica's favour—between Miss Birch and a certain much-talked-of lady, to name whom was to name the beauty of the season. Erica was—or it pleased her to pretend to be—very much flattered by the compliment.

To Barty, disgustedly listening, it seemed that the number of her male acquaintances who might, from Erica's eager guessing, have given utterance to the fulsome commonplace was legion. It was not Major White nor Captain Black, nor Algy this nor Reggie that. It was not that great monster of a Mild, nor that conceited little piece of feebleness, Strong. It was not any of these, nor of the weary lists of masculine names which Erica continued to produce until the ladies left the room.

When Barty entered the drawing-room after dinner, and was making toward that direction in which Miss Birch was placed, he found that this gray-moustached Colonel was still at his side. It was to him that Erica turned, almost pouncing upon him, as it seemed to Barty's offended sensibility, with yet another guess at the old fellow's wearisome enigma.

"Why, it was so stupid of me!" she said. "Of course I know who it was. It was——"

But here Mrs. Perry, with gentle authority, claimed Colonel West's attention, and Barty was enabled to drop into the place which that gentleman was about to fill.

Erica was sitting by a table pulled into a recess by the window, upon which some photographs and illustrated papers were scattered, and upon which a tiny lamp in a ruby glass shed a rosy light. The position she had taken up was by no means an isolated one. Two

elderly ladies, talking confidentially in a low tone close at hand, could have heard every word which was spoken to her. In a pause which occurred in their conversation, as Barty sat down, they looked with some interest towards the tall, big man, with the red face and the bald head, of whom neither had heard mention before, but who was evidently of importance in the Perry estimation, and to whom Erica, poor child! would now have to talk.

He was not easy to talk to, apparently. The two ladies looked without admiration at his unresponsive face as he sat, vouchsafing no reply to a laughing remark which Erica made on a photograph she had picked up nervously at random, and held towards him. Then, with raised brows, they looked in each other's eyes, as saying plainly, without need of words: "Poor Erica! What an unsociable creature!" and began again to talk.

"Would it be possible for me to speak to you for a few minutes?" Barty asked, leaning forward in his chair, and cutting across the laughing nonsense with which Erica sought to silence him by the directness of his speech.

She was silent. The empty words, the forced smiles, the scarlet of their hue, seemed to die off her lips together.

"I think not," she said at length, looking down upon the scattered contents of the table.

A pallor had fallen upon her face, a coldness upon her speech.

"Not? Not even if I have come from Tangier for the purpose of speaking to you?"

She shook her head without speaking, looking down upon a photograph she held in the hands that lay upon the table.

"Why not?"

She did not answer.

"You mean that you are not disposed to give me the opportunity?"

"I do not see that it is necessary; I am very happy to talk with you here."

A pause had come in the interesting conversation going on close at hand; Erica was painfully conscious that the ears of the two ladies beside her were intelligently open. She rallied her forces, and plunged at once into an animated manner.

"You heard of poor Mr. Harcourt, of course?" she inquired.

"I heard that he had gone away from Flint Hall."

"Oh yes. He had terrible fits—epilepsy—one after the other. It seems he had been subject to them before he went to my father. Sir Joseph took him away, and——"

"Eric, darling," Mrs. Perry interrupted, coming up at this point, "the Colonel is asking after the violin, love. Can't you give us a little music? That lovely thing you were trying over this morning?"

"Do you really want me to play, auntie?" the girl said; but she rose with evident relief. "The violin is in the morning-room—I will fetch it."

"And the stand, Eric—do not forget the stand. Let one of the servants——"

But Erica had passed through the door which Barty held open for her. She crossed the hall, and entered the morning-room, lit only by the fire, but sufficiently illuminated to enable Erica to make her way among the familiar objects to the piano, where she had stood in the morning to practise, to Mrs. Perry's accompaniment, the "Rêverie," which was to be performed in an impromptu fashion with much *éclat* to-night.

As Erica, in the half-obscurity, crossed the room, she heard the door close behind her.

"I have come to help you with the fiddle-stand," Barty said.

"Oh, there it is. Thank you so much. Be careful, please, that the sheets of music don't tumble down. They scatter themselves to the four winds of heaven with a dangerous facility on the smallest provocation. If you leave the door open for a minute, perhaps, you

will see better, and won't tumble over the chairs and tables and footstools and things——”

“Wait a minute. Is there occasion for such breathless hurry? I won't detain you for very long—but—I leave London again to-morrow.”

Erica, with a feeling of despair, laid her fiddle back in its case, and slowly moved a step or two nearer to the fire by which he was standing.

Accustomed by now to the dim light, he could see her with tolerable distinctness in her white dress. The firelight gleamed upon it, and brought out the sparkle of the small diamond clasp at her throat, with which her string of pearls was fastened. Her face was as white as her bare arms and neck. He would have been a very vain or a peculiarly unobservant man who could have derived encouragement from her demeanour of cold, enforced attention.

Barty, in the months that he had been parted from her, had seen her face in a thousand day and night dreams. In its fair, round beauty, the charm of which had sunk into his soul, it had haunted him persistently. Bright with mirth, mischievous with fun, it had come before him; sweetly serious, angry, loving; oftenest of all turned to him with eyes that besought him not to leave her. In its present aspect of courteous, unwilling attentiveness, he had never pictured it.

"You knew that I should come," he said, looking at her with angry reproach, and speaking as if in answer to something she had said.

She shook her head.

"I told you that I should come. I think those were the last words that I said to you—that I would see you soon. You know what I meant when I said that. You know what I have to say to you. I want to ask you to be my wife."

She opened her lips as if to speak, but no sound came save of a long-drawn breath. He saw her move the hands that hung at her sides to clasp them together with a nervous straining of the fingers; her eyes were fixed upon the leaping flame.

A minute, and then once more her lips moved.

"Oh no!" she said, with downhung head, breathing the words very softly, like a sigh; "oh no!"

For a space there was silence. Barty had been standing beside her with one hand grasping the mantelboard. He half turned from her now, and looked down also into the fire.

"Why not?" at length he said. When she did not answer—"Why not?" he repeated in a louder voice.

"It is out of the question. Quite impossible."

"Is there—since I saw you last—some one else?"

"No. Oh no; oh no!"

"And—you are not playing with me? You mean that this which I wish is impossible?"

"Quite—quite impossible."

"And could you not," he asked, turning upon her with sudden anger, "could you not have given me some word or hint of this on that day when I said good-bye to you? And you knew—you must have known of what I was thinking! What was your object in acting as you did? Where was the pleasure in sending me away believing a lie about you?"

"I know what you mean," she interrupted him, forcing herself, with a horrible reluctance, to make that explanation which through many an hour of a wakeful night she had told herself she longed to have the chance of making to him before she died; "I know what you mean. I was to blame; you must forgive me. The—the shock that day was too terrible. Although I am not slight and fragile-looking, as some women, I am easily frightened. I have no nerve. I did not know what I did or said that day, nor who—who you were. I hope you will understand, and—forget it all. You were not *you* to me at all, but just a human presence to which I could cling—a refuge from an overwhelming horror. I am ashamed when I look back. It—it misled you, I fear——"

Barty, looking at her with angry eyes, in which was no mirth at all, laughed,

"It was my mistake, of course," he said. "I alone was to blame. Let us thank God that I am the only one to suffer. And now—Is this the stand? I must apologize for keeping you so long. Shall we go back to Mrs. Perry?"

The violin solo went off brilliantly. Miss Birch was not a particularly fine performer, but she was a very fine girl, and showed to great advantage as she played; her pretty round chin laid in a distracting fashion upon the instrument, her white shapely arm displaying its loveliest curves, her well-developed figure showing to great advantage.

Mrs. Perry at the piano, looking up at the charming picture now and then, congratulated herself and Erica that the baronet's brother was there to see.

But Barty was not looking. He had turned his back on the ravishing sight, and had betaken himself again to the table which he had temporarily forsaken, where he occupied himself in picking up and flinging down again the photographs which lay there. After a minute he was joined by his host, who was a good fellow and a very good talker. Mr. Perry found Barty anything rather than a congenial companion. He decided that if, as his wife had not failed to suggest to him in his dressing-room just now, Barty had "come after" Erica, he was not very likely to succeed in his

enterprise, being evidently more of a man's man than a woman's man, being of such a red complexion, of a bald head, having too many years by a half-score, at least, for pretty Erica Birch.

However, he talked to the man, as in duty bound, whispering all through that fiddling of Erica's, devoting himself to the stranger among his guests—a stranger by no means after his own taste, to whom, he remembered, Erica had not troubled to talk at dinner, and who, now that the "Rêverie" was over and the girl released, did not seek her side again nor show the least desire for Miss Birch's society. Mr. Perry was inclined to wonder what the man had come for. He was not by any means sorry when he saw him depart.

"Pooh! Rubbish! He doesn't mean anything of the kind," he declared presently, in answer to a remark of his wife's, standing upon his own hearth, his guests and Erica having departed. "Lucky for him he doesn't—a surly, ill-conditioned bear of a fellow, and about as ugly as they make 'em."

But Mrs. Perry took a much more lenient view. He was a most distinguished-looking man, she declared. The others (with the exception of her husband, whose success in life precluded the possibility of his being found wanting in any desirable quality, moral or physical) looked quite dwarfed and insignificant beside him. He

had spoken, too, before dinner with such consideration and kindness of poor Dicky.

Ah, that was more promising! That certainly looked as if there might be something in Mrs. Perry's view of matters, her husband admitted, with a sardonic dragging down of the corners of his lips. The great Q.C. had had in his time some not quite harmonious dealings with the always impecunious and irresponsible Dicky. He had, beside, an easy habit, born of his own good-fortune, of despising men in pecuniary difficulties.

Mr. Barty's brother was in very ill-health, Mrs. Perry further informed her husband, weightily, being determined to put the ailing baronet's brother in the best possible light before him.

He laughed, glancing at his wife over the top of the cigar-case which he had drawn from his pocket.

"Oh, of course, if you will have it so," he said, with a derisive glitter in his eyes. "But as it's getting late, hadn't you better go and interview the future Lady Barty in her bedroom, then?"

It was a very languid invitation to enter that Erica gave in reply to Mrs. Perry's summons at her bedroom door. She had known that her aunt would come, and had been in her own mind pondering the project of a headache, or a not-to-be-accounted-for fatigue, to escape the explanation she knew she would be expected to give.

In the last four or five years as many young men had come with their hearts and their generally insignificant fortunes to lay at the feet of the distracting Erica. Indeed, those young members of his own profession who obtained a footing in his house seemed invariably to fall in love with the successful barrister's niece. There had been, beside, other eligible offers made to her which Erica had not seen her way to accept.

Of these love-affairs Aunt Eliza had known always the ins and the outs, pitying or making merry over the victims, as the case might be, but with a perfect understanding with Erica on the subject. That this, if it were indeed a case of that deeply interesting kind—that this affair with Sir William Barty's brother should not quite as readily be discussed, never for a moment entered Mrs. Perry's mind.

How could she guess at the shrinking the girl felt from such a desecration? How could Erica be expected to speak Barty's name like the names of other men? how could she endure to hear it jestingly, lightly spoken? Barty's, who, one of a throng—incredible thought!—to others, was, and must ever be, *the* one apart from the rest of the common world to her!

Once established in her niece's presence, not much time did Mrs. Perry suffer to elapse in approaching her subject. She closed the door briskly, sat herself down in a chair by the fire, clasped her hands upon her lap,

and looked across, brightly curious, at Erica, who had completed her toilette for the night, and with her hair loose upon her shoulders, and a wrapper over her night-dress, was sitting upon the side of the bed.

"Well, Eric, love? Anything to tell me? I'm afraid it was a dull evening, after all, for your friend, eh?"

She leant forward, cosily, holding her hands to shield her face from the blaze, her eyes, brightly questioning, upon Erica's.

"I should have been unhappy about him," she went on; "only as he came to see you, and you were there, as large as life, for him to see, I reflected that he had gained his object, and was therefore presumably content."

"I dare say he did very well," Erica said, not very distinctly.

She had taken up a brush as her aunt began to speak, and had commenced to whisk about the abundant dark locks hanging around her face.

"Don't be so hard-heartedly indifferent," Mrs. Perry said playfully. "Why are you sitting there in those polar regions? Come here to the fire, and be comfortable and Christian-like; and let me brush your hair for you—like a good child."

Erica, longing to refuse, came slowly forward, and knelt upon the rug at her aunt's feet, and threw her hair over her shoulders, and duly presented the brush.

More proudly and lovingly than usual Mrs. Perry

drew the brush down the rippled tresses, shining with a ruddy tinge among the brown in the warm light.

"And is Mr. Barty coming again to-morrow, dear?" she asked, not too quickly, having waited with patience, and in vain, to hear Erica speak.

"To-morrow? Oh no. He leaves London—England—to-morrow."

"He does!"

Mrs. Perry's heart sank. After all, had she been mistaken? and yet—then why had he come?

In her disappointment she grew irritable. She bore too hardly upon the hair, the fluffy ends tangled round the brush, and Erica flinched away.

Mrs. Perry laid down the brush resignedly upon her knees.

"My dear, it is impossible for me to reach you if you hold your head in that position," she said; and Erica dropped into a sitting posture at her aunt's feet.

"Erica," that lady began again in a tone of mild exasperation, "have you nothing to tell me about this Mr. Barty? I do not understand the necessity for any secrecy on the subject. If there is nothing between him and you——"

"There is nothing," Erica said briefly. "Nothing."

"Then his coming here in the way that he has done is peculiar, to say the least of it."

Erica was silent.

"The only possible explanation, of course, is that the man is in love with you," Mrs. Perry continued in that tone of restrained displeasure with which Erica her niece and Fairfax her husband were not all unacquainted.

The girl shook her head.

"He isn't that," she said sharply; "not in the least—the very, very least."

"Well, what does he mean, then? Can you explain it?"

"I think," Erica said slowly, as if the words were being painfully dragged from her; "I think—perhaps—he was under the impression—that I—was in love—with him."

"Erica! Good gracious!"

"I think that was it. And so he came. He couldn't very well do anything else, when you think of it. And he asked me to—marry him. And I—refused him."

"Erica! Are you sure? But when? Not to-night? Not in that four minutes you were out of the room with him? It was four minutes to the very tick, because I——"

"It was long enough," Erica said with dreary bitterness—"quite. I did not waste time in many words—he did not give way to emotion," with a short laugh.

Mrs. Perry was dismayed and disappointed in a manner she would not have cared to express. The man was so *very* eligible. She was not a wordly woman—of

the world, but unworldly; it was so that she thought of herself. A thousand times, in speaking of the interested marriages of her friends, she had told Erica that money and position were by no means the first things to be considered. Her tongue was tied; and yet the man was delightfully eligible!

"Of course, it is a case in which you must decide for yourself, Erica," she said gravely. "He might be *twice* as distinguished-looking—he might be twice as rich, twice as well-born, and—and altogether desirable; and yet if you truly feel that you could not *love* the man——"

But here, to her immense astonishment, Erica suddenly turned as she sat, and flung her head with all its heavy hair upon her aunt's knee and burst into a passion of weeping.

"Auntie, I will tell you," she sobbed. "It isn't that. It isn't because of me—and what I feel. It is because he is—heartless—and false—and cruel—that I will not marry him. I will not, if I break my heart!"

After a few minutes of unrestrained weeping—so unlike any emotion Mrs. Perry had ever seen the girl give way to before, that it did, indeed, seem to her that Erica's heart was broken—by the aid of much sorrowful petting and encouragement and entreaty, an explanation was dragged from her unwilling lips.

"You remember Penny, auntie—the poor girl that I saw? She had killed herself. It was through him—"

Hugh Barty. And he had no pity. He let another man—so poor and ignorant that he did not know how to clear himself, or to get himself believed—he let this poor wretch bear the blame. And—like a coward—oh, auntie, auntie! could you look at him and believe that he is a coward?—he turned his back and ran away.”

“My darling!” Mrs. Perry said. She was cold with horror and dismay. A wretch—such a wretch as that, however eligible—to have approached her petted, jealously-guarded Erica! “My darling! How dared he come here? What an escape, Erica! What an escape!”

CHAPTER II.

AUDREY IS TAKEN TO THE ZOO.

WITHIN a month of that luckless visit of Hugh Barty's, Mrs. Perry, in an awed voice, read aloud from the *Times* the announcement of the death of Sir William Barty at Tangier.

"He is Sir Hugh now," she said, lowering the paper and looking at her niece across the breakfast-table, with eyes eloquent of a thousand things.

"Poor Lady Barty!" Erica said, coldly averting her own gaze from the expressive eyes. "Her little boy dead also! She has nothing now—and she was once so sweet to me!"

"What will he do?" Mrs. Perry went on. "Of course Flint Hall will have seen the last of him, Eric; and, whatever he may be, that is a bad job, in a money point of view, for your father. Will he take up his residence at Bigby, do you suppose?"

Erica shook her head with an air of disdaining the subject.

"He—ran away from that neighbourhood once. He will be wise enough to keep away, probably," she said.

"My dear!" her aunt began, and there stopped.

She had been upon the point of saying that in his new position all old errors and frailties would be forgiven him; but she could not say that to Erica.

"He will stay abroad, I should think," Erica said steadily. "He will marry Lady Dalling, and stay abroad."

"Marry Lady Dalling?"

"Of course—didn't you know? I thought everybody knew that story. She is the one woman—the dear, adorable, half-divine creature—a woman with her hair dyed yellow, and a smile like a Cheshire cat! That is the great passion! All the rest of us have been for the amusement of the hour—mere distractions——"

"But, my dear child, Lord Dalling has only been in his grave a week—and—of course, he is an unprincipled man; we know that, fortunately—but he did look so unlike anything of the kind! He had the air of being—well, *gentleman* to the finger-tips."

Erica laughed with a cynicism that was as foreign to herself as it was distressing to Mrs. Perry.

"It is all a thing not to laugh at, but to grieve over," she said with some asperity. "And really, Erica, the more I think of it the less I understand his coming over—the kind of man you represent him to be—and offering marriage to you. If there was that wretched girl, and there is this Lady Dalling, as you say, why—why did he do that?"

"That?" Erica said, and laughed, lying back in her

chair. "Because he is, perhaps, as you say, a gentleman, to a certain extent; he has inherited the traditions of his kind, and he has lived among decent people. I, you see, had made a fool of myself, and he—he thought I expected it, and—— Oh, good heaven! how do I know why he did it? What does it matter? Let us, for mercy's sake, forget it!"

Perhaps she forgot. At any rate, she made it understood that on that one theme she would not be made to talk. Once and again, as time went on, she saw in the society papers some mention of Sir Hugh Barty's whereabouts. She knew from the same source that Lady Barty was living for the present at Bigby Court. Dicky in a couple of letters mentioned the new baronet's name, lamented the loss of his companionship and his pay. After that forgot his existence apparently.

Erica, with little outward alteration, went through the fatigues of the season—of that mild season, that is, whose second-rate glories alone affected the Perry set.

She refreshed herself in the autumn with the usual Continental trip to which Mr. Perry treated his family; she stayed up in Scotland with some people she had met abroad; and to Mrs. Perry she seemed scarcely to have settled down in Granville Gardens again when Christmas was almost here, and the annual visit to Flint Hall due.

To Erica herself the time had not seemed short.

The months and weeks and days had crept away with leaden, weary-footed hours. She would not for worlds complain of that. She would allow no one to guess that the one episode in her hitherto prosperous career had had the power to spoil her life. She ridiculed the fact to herself, trying to prove that it could not be. A man whom she had known for six weeks—it was incredible that the loss of him should take the zest from all enjoyment, the interest from every duty, should make the pleasant days so flat and unprofitable! It was a ridiculous, morbid fancy. She would die rather than confess it even to herself.

So she laughed and talked as much, perhaps more than ever; held her head as gaily erect, was bolder as coquette, and more successful—longed only for the foolish fancy to pass, for the time to get away.

It was a year at last. Women forget so much in a year—husband, children, sometimes—and smile and are happy! And him—this man—a not specially attractive man, a not particularly pleasant, a by no means beautiful man—she had known for less than two months!

And what of that? she sometimes asked, “rounding” on herself with sudden passion. What has time to do with such things? Aren’t there people we see every day of our lives from whom we could part for ever without one pang of regret? Aren’t there others we meet for an hour with whom we exchange, maybe, a

few words and a hand-shake, perhaps only a glance of recognition, a message sent from soul to soul, from whom we separate with a sense as of irrecoverable loss? Six weeks—six days—six hours—sixty years—what does it matter? The best things in the soul's history are not things of time!

So, on that little era in her heart's story she dwelt, and let her life pass unheeded by. The months dragged slowly on, and were as nothing to her. What had happened in them she could not have told. They had been empty and dreary, and her heart had ached and sickened with a restless weariness past description all through. The one good thing to be said of them had been that they were gone and could never come again.

In the last few days before Christmas there had come to stay in the Perrys' house that young cousin—Barty's favourite little companion of last year—she of the tangled mop of hair, of the oval face, and the red-brown eyes, whom he had valiantly rescued from the dear dangers of the mistletoe-bough, and the seasonable attentions of "Cousin Alf." It had been arranged that Audrey should spend a few days in Granville Gardens, and duly accompany Erica on the morning of Christmas Eve to Grainge.

On the last day of her stay in town, in accordance with a promise which she had extorted, this young per-

son, escorted by her hostess and her cousin Erica, was introduced to the wonders and delights of the "Zoo."

There were days on which Erica felt a curious consciousness of the neighbourhood of Hugh Barty—when she looked with a shrinking eagerness for his tall form as she walked or drove, when she could not hear a ring at the hall-door bell or witness the appearance of an unlooked-for visitor without the thought throbbing through her that, possibly, he had come. At times her heart, at sight of some tall head towering over other men's shoulders, would seem to stand still. She would discover a startling momentary likeness to his expression, carriage, complexion, in every man she met. At others nothing in the world seemed to her less probable than that they two should meet again.

She was in one of these latter moods this morning, and, although possibly none the lighter-hearted for that, she was the less preoccupied and the pleasanter companion. Something of the excitement and the gaiety of the younger girl seemed to have been communicated to her. Her face, as she jumped out of Mrs. Perry's carriage at the entrance to the Gardens, was as bright and fresh as the morning, which happened to be a quite irreproachable morning for the time of year, the sun shining, the air crisp and clear, a hard frost under foot.

Audrey was very thorough in her sight-seeing; not a house, nor a cage, nor an aviary, nor a winding walk,

would she spare her escort. Mrs. Perry was in agonies at the friendship she struck up with the camels, the giraffes, and the elephants. She trembled over the familiarities of the monkey-house. Among the tigers she felt a little safer, but that Audrey would lean so imprudently over the barrier. They had this place all to themselves when they entered, but while they stood before the centre cage, and Audrey was busy in reading aloud for the general benefit the inscription setting forth the fact that that especial young tiger had been sent from India, and stating by whom it was presented, a party of people entered by the door opposite to that by which the Perry party had come in.

The comparative silence of the place was at once broken by a great deal of talking, principally in a childish voice. A little boy in tiny trousers, a pilot jacket, and a Tam-o'-Shanter at the back of a fair, curly head, was expressing his emotions in the highest of high excited trebles.

"Ho! I say, mother! Look at this fellow," he was saying. "I like this fellow better than the monkeys! He don't seem so angry with you. I say, will he get you? His bars are pretty strong, aren't they? He can't spring out there and get you, can he?"

With the little fellow were two ladies; both were in mourning, and one of them, the elder and less attractive

and sadder-looking, tightly held the child's hand. With them was a gentleman.

They came on slowly, laughing, and talking to the half-frightened child. When they paused before the cage next to that of the Indian tiger, Audrey, having finished reading the inscription, looked up.

"Eric!" she whispered, and sprang back a step and caught her cousin's arm; "Eric! don't you see who it is? It is Mr. Barty!"

The fact was no news to Erica. She had seen on the first moment of their entrance of whom the party consisted, and had known that on this day, when she had seemed to be so unusually free of his haunting presence, Hugh Barty was near her at last.

As Audrey spoke he came forward and greeted them all. He, too, had turned at Audrey's voice without any shock of surprise, pleasant or the reverse. As Erica's glance had lit on him his own had caught it, and it was with all his cool, accustomed reserve of manner that he performed his greeting.

Recognising the girl to whom Sir Hugh was speaking, Lady Barty, with a sudden lighting up of her sad face, came forward and spoke to Erica. Presently she turned and presented Miss Birch to Lady Dalling. Erica, as in duty bound, introduced her aunt, and so for a short time the two little parties were one.

Audrey at once took possession of her old friend,

making affectionate inquiries about Nipper, the white fox terrier, whose acquaintance she had made at Flint Hall, and for whom it seemed she had cherished a faithful affection ever since; grieving loudly over the intelligence that the petted old dog had become blind of one eye, fat, lazy, ill-tempered; imparting to Barty her valuable opinion of the zoological show generally, and going into especial raptures over the tigers—dear, beautiful things, of which she could never be afraid, not she. She would love to pet and coax them!

“Did you see him open his mouth, Lady Barty?” the child in the tiny trousers, with his mother’s fair hair, curling out from beneath his hat, cried again, in his little hysterical, musical voice; “it’s because he wants to bite my head off. But he can’t get it! You can’t get it, old man, because your bars are so awful strong! Sir Hugh, if you’re quite—quite sure they’re awful strong, would you rattle at the bars with your stick, please, just to show him we aren’t afraid?”

“He is the same age as my Hughie,” Lady Barty was whispering to Erica. “My darling had hair of that colour, you know, but it did not curl *quite* so much. It was like Hugh’s, we used to think—fine, and a little waved, and not, perhaps, so *very* abundant. We used to say—Will and I—that he would be like Hugh when he grew up—our dear boy!”

The "Hugh" in question, hearing his name, turned round from the cage, and looked at Erica.

"Have you been to Flint Hall lately, Miss Birch?" he asked, with exceeding stiffness of demeanour.

And Erica, to her relief, found that she was moved to inward mirth only by the stand-offish manner—that quite easily she could reply to him. She was going down to Grainge to-morrow, she told him.

"The eleven o'clock from St. Pancras," Audrey struck in with her childish pride of detail.

Sir Hugh Barty condescended to address a few more remarks to Miss Birch, who talked to him with smiling readiness, and a sudden feeling of great coldness and indifference, and a sense of freedom at last from that foolish fancy which had dominated her and spoilt all her pleasant days.

It occurred to Lady Dalling then for the first time who this tall and handsome girl must be—this Miss Birch, who talked and laughed with so much ease and self-possession.

"Flint Hall?" she repeated to herself, as she moved on with her little boy. "It is the daughter of that ridiculous old man Hugh has told me about. I never knew that there was a daughter."

When the tiger-house was exhausted, and they all stood in the open air again, they separated, Audrey being bent on finding the monkey-house, and Lady

Dalling's party having come from there. But during the next hour several times they met; and now Barty, very tall and stiff and unbending, would say a few words to Erica amid the shrieks and chatter of a thousand parrots; now Erica and Lady Barty, discovering a sympathy in their mutual loathing of the reptile creation, exchanged remarks with their backs to the door of the reptile-house.

It was there that Erica learnt that Lady Barty had left Bigby Court for good, that all the furniture she had cared to take was removed, and that the place was standing empty, ready for Sir Hugh when it should please him to settle down there.

"And when will that be?" Erica asked, smiling with an air of quite natural indifference.

There was such a relief in feeling that at last the man and his doings, his presence or his absence, were matters which in nowise touched her. She grew bold in her newly-acquired sense of freedom, and would speak his name quite readily, and question his movements. Audrey had monopolized him again. Audrey was getting too old for that amusing forwardness of manner, which could only be excused in a child, Audrey's cousin said to herself. They were laughing delightedly over some joke they had discovered in the anaconda, a subject not mirth-inspiring at all from Erica's point of view.

"Is Sir Hugh likely to settle in Bigby?"

"Who can say? I have induced him to stay with me over Christmas. He goes off then—who knows where?"

"We shall be sure to meet again," the ladies said to each other as the others issued from the snake-house.

"We shall meet again," Erica said gaily to Hugh Barty, with a little nod and a smile.

But, as it happened, it was not in the gardens of the Zoo that these two were destined to meet again.

CHAPTER III.

"THAT HE IS MAD, 'TIS TRUE."

As Mrs. Perry and the two girls in her charge got into the carriage near the entrance to the Gardens, two men walking slowly by pulled up. The shorter of the two, looking eagerly at the ladies, spoke a word to his companion and advanced alone toward the carriage door.

"Who is that, Eric?" Mrs. Perry said, seeing a stranger raising his hat. At the same moment the brougham drove off. "Did you see him, dear? Who was it?"

"Why, surely it must have been Mr. Harcourt," Erica said, looking at her aunt with a perplexed expression of face. "Surely it is he. But, then, how terribly altered! Audrey, can it be he—do you recognise him?"

Audrey had stretched her head out of window.

"He is standing in the road, looking after us," she said. "It is Mr. Harcourt. He is more of a lunatic than ever. He will be run over soon. The other man has taken hold of his arm and——"

But here, at Mrs. Perry's shocked entreaty, Audrey

was compelled to resume her seat, and her interesting report ceased.

Five minutes later, Barty, having seen his party drive off, walking by the side of the Regent's Park railings, overtook the same two men—Lucian Harcourt and a quiet-looking middle-aged person dressed in black, who walked at the other's side, but to whom Lucian did not appear to have anything to say.

Barty also did not recognise his man on the instant; looked back when he had passed him, to make sure it could not be Harcourt, so altered and emaciated did the young man appear, then, catching the flash of recognition in the big, brilliant eyes, stopped and put out his hand.

"I thought it must be you, Harcourt," he said. "Why didn't you speak to me, man?"

Harcourt had shifted his gaze and stood with a hanging head and an air of sullenness new in Barty's recollection of the man's not altogether pleasant ways.

"It didn't occur to me to speak to you," he said.

The other looked at him with something less than his old dislike because of the miserable physical condition in which he found his old—never congenial—companion.

"He's booked, poor young devil!" he said to himself pitifully. "She said he'd had fits—it looks as if his fits had about finished him."

He glanced from the pallid face, in which the eyes seemed so much too large and too bright, to the man, looking like a servant in plain clothes, who had withdrawn a pace or two, and now stood with his back to the park railings, gazing abstractedly into the road.

"I suppose they never know when the fits come on," Barty said to himself, going on in the momentary pause with his own cogitations. "Good God, what a fate!"

Truly this poor, sickly young fellow, of the shrunken form, the hanging head, and sullen, dejected air, would irritate him never again by rhapsodies poured into Erica's ear, by endless German waltzes, moonlight sonatas, and love-songs! Sir Hugh valued his own strength and health too highly to look upon weakness and suffering unmoved. His pity grew within him, and a compunction seized him for past discourtesy.

"Are you staying in town, Harcourt?" he said kindly. "Come and see me, will you?"

He took out a card, and put it into the other's unwilling fingers.

"Come to-morrow, like a good fellow. I shall be in till one o'clock. We shall be better friends now that we don't see so much of each other, no doubt."

He laughed, and put out his hand, and was going to pass on. He was astonished at the grip of Harcourt's small yellow hand detaining him.

"Wait," he said; "I have seen her to-day. I must see her again. I want you to tell me where she lives."

Barty pulled his hand away.

"You mean Miss Birch, I suppose?" he said, at once very stiff and unapproachable.

"Yes. I must see her."

"Well, you won't do that. I have nothing to do with giving her address; and, in any case, she is leaving to-morrow for Grainge. Goes down by the eleven o'clock from St. Pancras. You'll have to put off calling on her till her return."

With that he nodded and went on his way, feeling less kindly toward the wretched wreck he left behind him.

"Ugh! There is something distasteful in that kind of thing in such a poor bankrupt beggar as that!" he said to himself disgustedly.

The picture of Erica, smiling, radiant in health and beauty, as she had stood before him just now, rose again upon his mental vision. That the sickly, broken-down wretch, with those burning, restless eyes, should have dared to lift them to this woman whom Barty had, for a time, intended to make his wife, seemed to him as offensive as Harcourt's devotion had always been profoundly disagreeable.

It was, however, only another unpleasant phase of a subject that in every phase was unpleasant, and therefore obtrusive—thrusting itself upon him at all moments,

never, in whatever strange or familiar place, amid whatever congenial or uncongenial surroundings—never to be fairly ignored.

He had come now to execrating that era in his career—that disastrously remarkable episode of madness in a sane, sensible, self-respecting history—when suddenly, without the warning of a quicker pulse or a louder heart-beat, he had knocked under, helpless in the clasp of a pair of clinging hands, shaken to the soul by the music of an imploring voice, vanquished by the love-light in fair eyes; when, in spite of his age and hardly-bought wisdom, he had made of himself more of a fool than any raw boy in his first love-sickness; when he had allowed himself to be as easily deceived, and laughed at, and thrown aside.

One benefit alone had accrued to him from the disastrous experience. As one nail drives another out, so his folly with regard to Erica had entirely displaced his folly with regard to Lady Dalling.

She was a widow now, fairly young and sufficiently beautiful, with a score of men dangling about her, presumably desirous of filling the place left vacant by Lord Dalling's death. Barty knew quite well that, in his now improved condition, it was expected of him that he should fill it. He knew that she herself expected him to offer to do so.

A year ago, she being free and his brother dead, he thought it likely that—with no great eagerness even

then, more as a result of what he had felt for her than of what he was feeling—he might have done what was expected of him. No power could have induced him so to make offering of himself now.

The woman was fair as ever, her hair as yellow, her lips as red, her laugh, showing all the white teeth, as frequent and free; the roving glance was as gay and as kind. But the cord which had drawn his heart—or his fancy—to her was severed; the charm had ceased to work. The ghastly necessity he was under—his love for her being dead—to dangle a pitiful ghost of that old passion before its object, and the eyes of the society in which he found her, was irksome in the extreme. It had a good deal to do with his restless wanderings of late; for he had been a man fairly satisfied with the resources of his own country, and not much addicted to travel hitherto.

In spite of the invitation he had given, it was with no feeling of regret that Barty discovered, on the following day, that Harcourt did not appear at his rooms. He had not really wished for his presence, he found, nor much expected it.

"I never knew how to be civil to him for more than two minutes at a time, poor beggar!" he said. "It's as well he stayed away."

However, he waited for an hour over the time he

had named; then, with a feeling of relief, got himself into his great-coat—for the frost of yesterday had broken up, the clear skies were leaden, flakes of snow were falling mingled with the rain—and told his man to call a hansom, intending to have himself driven to his sister-in-law's house for lunch.

As he opened the door to pass out, a man, rushing in, hurled himself against him.

Sir Hugh drew back angrily.

"Where the deuce are you coming to?" he demanded, resettling his hat, disarranged in the collision, and mechanically dusting down the outraged sleeve of his overcoat.

The man made no apology. He was white and a little wild of face, splashed with the yellow slush of the streets; but Barty saw that he was the same man who, neat and spruce and respectful-looking, had walked by Lucian Harcourt's side yesterday. Disgustedly he decided at once that the fellow was either drunk or had gone mad.

The man caught at Sir Hugh's sleeve as he was brushing past him.

"Is young Mr. Harcourt here?" he asked excitedly.

"Mr. Harcourt? Certainly not. Why?"

"Has he been here? I found your card on his table, Sir Hugh—I had not left him three minutes. I've been everywhere else I could think of that he'd be likeliest to go, and I've come on here by order of the governor."

"What is it that you mean?" Barty asked. He shut the door, and pulled the man inside. "Why should not Mr. Harcourt go where he likes?"

"He's mad, Sir Hugh. And say what the governor like, he's a dangerous madman."

"Good God! For how long?"

"He've been in confinement for the last year, sir; and once before—when he was quite a young gentleman. Sir Joseph was anxious to have him under his own eye this time, and he give the poor gentleman into my charge. And I—I've had a lot of experience, sir, and I never had no unpleasantness, so to speak, with a patient before. I'd but just turned my back on him—that had a drowsy fit this morning, and was foxing a sleep on his sofa. And the governor he've gone one way and have sent me in a contra'y direction; and I'd a hope he might have come to you, and——"

"What time was it that you missed him?"

"Somewheres about half after ten, sir."

And the train by which Erica was to leave St. Pancras for the country left at a little after eleven! Barty's high-coloured complexion paled like a girl's.

"I know where he is," he said. "He's gone to Grainge. You come on at once with me to St. Pancras. There's a chance that, by God's mercy, he may have missed that train."

But the keeper demurred:

"I daren't do that without further orders, sir," he said. "I've got my list of places, and I must report to Sir Joseph now I've been to 'em."

"Telegraph to him, and come with me I will take the responsibility."

But the man refused to do so.

"Curse you for a fool, then!" Barty said savagely, and pushed him on one side. Then, making for the hansom in waiting, he had himself driven to St. Pancras Station.

There nothing could he positively learn of Harcourt; he could not prove to his entire satisfaction that no passenger, pale of face, attenuated of form, and unduly bright of eye, had left by the eleven o'clock train; nor could Barty quite justify to his reason the ghastly fear that possessed him, that Harcourt had done so.

Again and again he cursed himself for having made the hideous thing possible. It had been his own tongue—not used to babble, but urged to wag by the insane desire of keeping this man, any man, from Erica's presence—that had done the deed.

Supposing that he had gone, what had happened? A lonely, nervous girl shut up with a dangerous mad-man!

The drops of sweat stood on Barty's brow.

"God keep me from going mad myself!" he said.

CHAPTER IV.

"LOVE, AND HER SOFT HOURS."

THAT party of high-spirited and noisy young people who at Christmas-time always enjoyed their festivities at Dicky Birch's expense, were already assembled when Erica and her young cousin Audrey arrived at Flint Hall.

They had left the snow churned into splashing yellow mud in the London streets; they found it at Grainge a silent white beauty laid on all familiar things.

"Ah, isn't it lovely?" Audrey cried, rubbing the mist from the window of the covered wagonette the better to look out.

"It is a world remade," Erica said solemnly.

On her own heart, too, a pall of sadness and of silence had fallen. Yet to her every familiar landmark, every welcoming face, spoke the name she would not utter. Flint Hall was almost to her as the grave that held what had been sweetest in her life. Was it possible that to these other people it was just as ever?

Was it possible that they had forgotten Barty—that they could take their old places without a thought of his vacant chair? That they were not always with

painful vividness recalling his attitude, his gestures, the not too frequent but most welcome laugh, the slow smile, the scanty speech? That they did not miss the mysterious but potent attraction of his presence? Could they have forgotten—or, more wonderful still, had these things never been of importance to them? Would their enjoyment of last year have been as great without him that this year they seemed so happily to acquiesce in his absence?

Each one of Dicky's men had sped on his especial way, and the Birch party had the house to themselves.

That young cousin of the eyeglass and the curling moustache, who was reported to have been in love with Erica, had arrived in the pessimistic mood which is said to be the fashion among very young men. He had been a boy last year, and in love; he had done with youth and love now, and all other illusions. He had become exceedingly fond of hearing his own voice, too, and was never tired of promulgating hackneyed ideas which, if he had believed in them, would have proclaimed his heart as empty as his head. As it happened, it was by this youth alone that Erica heard the name of Barty mentioned.

"Barty not here!" Alfy had said, throwing himself into the huge saddle-bag chair which had formerly accommodated the far more stalwart frame; "the more

room for others, then. I'm not goin' to say I'm sorry. He was always a pompous ass—takin' up more space in the world than the world owed him. Sir Hugh now, ain't he? Expect he's more insufferable than ever."

As the dusk of the afternoon came on, and the party assembled as of old about the library fire, there was brought in to Dicky Birch—sitting with a youngster on his knee and another perched upon the arm of his chair—a telegram.

The men were always altering their arrangements, going and coming at all sorts of unexpected moments. Telegraphy was as familiar in that house as the penny post.

Dicky threw the unopened pink envelope across to his daughter.

"I bet that young donkey, Boxer, has changed his mind about going on to Paris to-morrow, and is coming down again," he said. "I shan't relish sending a horse and man to the station on such a night."

Erica was sitting opposite her father, while Audrey, squatted upon the hearth-rug, leaned her back against her cousin's knee. Listlessly she took the telegram and bent forward with it as she tore the envelope, that the light of the fire might fall upon the message, the room being in darkness save for the light of the fire, and of one lamp in the distance.

Erica's face changed as she opened the flimsy bit of paper, for her eyes fell at once upon the name of the sender.

"Harcourt mad—escaped keeper!" she read, not for the moment understanding the purport of the words; "be on your guard."

"Harcourt mad!" Erica repeated.

She looked up with a puzzled face at her father.

"Mad! What fun!" Audrey cried, leaning her head back to get a sight of the telegram. "We saw him yesterday. I said he looked like a lunatic. Erica, didn't I say he looked like a lunatic?"

"We're all of us lunatics more or less; I wonder you troubled to mention it," said the eyeglassed young man, with the gloomy lightness of tone which he was making habitual.

"The telegram, daddy, is from Sir Hugh Barty," Erica said slowly.

"From Barty?" Dicky held out his fingers for the paper and groped about his person for his eyeglasses. "Mad! Deeee-ar me! Harcourt mad! Poor Harcourt! Tut-tut! Well, those fits looked queer. I always said those fits looked queer. 'Be on your guard!' Barty says. Why, poor creature, if he's run away from his keeper, he isn't very likely to run as far as Grainge. Dear, dear! An only son, too. Ah, bad job for that pompous old fool of a father, Eric, my love—very bad job!"

No more delightful excitement could have been added to the pleasures of that Christmas Eve than the possibility, dwelt on with much insistence by the girls and boys, of a maniac suddenly breaking in upon them. A bell ringing in ever so distant a part of the house, a door opening suddenly, a footstep on the stair or in the hall, was deemed sufficient excuse for them to shriek, to laugh, to clutch desperately at their neighbours.

Dicky Birch, who had treated the young fellow with the greatest kindness while under his roof, was as ready to make merry over his madness as the rest of the children. He personated the escaped lunatic in a highly applauded but, to say truth, not very felicitous manner; making hideous grimaces at the child upon his knee, or suddenly stretching out an arm to grab at the throat of one of the circle whose head was turned away, and who never omitted to scream in a fashion wildly to delight the rest.

Only Erica was silent, and refused to be either merry or alarmed.

When the rest had been safely stowed away in their various rooms to make ready for dinner, Erica returned to her father, yawning and stretching himself over the library fire.

"Daddy," she said, standing before him, "this is very terrible about poor Mr. Harcourt. You don't appear to me to be either very much grieved or surprised; but

it was a horrid shock to me. I want to ask you—do you think it was something sudden, daddy, or is it possible that when he was here—even then—he should not have been in his right mind?”

“You mean when he was making love to you, you rogue?” Dicky remarked with extreme waggishness.

Then, seeing that Erica did not smile, he at once became very grave.

“I’ll tell you what I think of Harcourt, my dear,” he said. “I think he was an underhand fellow. There was always something secretive about him, if you’ll remember, Erica. I never was in love with the fellow—even if you were, love—even if you were, eh? But things I heard of him after he’d left opened my eyes. I’m not surprised, not so very surprised, after those fits—you were gone when the fits came on? Lucky for you—and I’m not at all sure he has not met with his deserts. However, unless he’s very mad indeed—very mad—Harcourt won’t come into this neighbourhood, I think, love—not here!”

“Why?” Erica asked. Her voice was low and awed: the prescience of what she was to hear had come to her. “Why?”

“You know how the fits came on? Didn’t I write you the account? No? I was a good deal upset at the time, and then—then I suppose the thing escaped my

memory. There is so much for me to think of, Erica—so much. He went to see that poor girl—Bye's daughter, you know—in her coffin: morbid thing to do—the man was mad then, no doubt, and his madman's fancy, or his bad conscience, cheated him into an odd idea. He thought she grabbed him, Erica—the dead girl, you know. He yelled out that she was grabbing him, and tumbled over in a fit. It was his evil conscience, poor rascal! no doubt."

"Why?" Erica said again, her tongue dry against the roof of her mouth. "Why?"

"Well—that poor Penny—poor Bye's daughter—it seems she was a bad lot, my dear. Shady Bush don't seem to have been the only one, Erica. Boxer knew all about it. He's one of those fellows with a nose for such things—Boxer. He says there was a regular *affaire* between Harcourt and the girl; he says Bush was picked up as a—— Well, well! These aren't matters for you and me to talk about, Erica; only there's a lot going on in the world that's very shocking—very shocking indeed! And Barty was so confoundedly set against poor Bush, and——"

"Daddy," Erica interrupted, "do you believe what you have told me about Mr. Harcourt? Are you certain that it's true?"

"Oh, it's right enough," Birch said, turning on his heel, "The fellow managed to throw dust in my eyes,

somehow. But others were sharper—they knew what was going on. Boxer could give you chapter and verse—and he wasn't the only one. It's right enough. It's a disgustingly ungentlemanly fashion to behave in a man's house—I'd have turned him out if I'd known, fast enough—and I'm sorry you met such a fellow under my roof, Erica—very sorry. But if the poor devil was mad, why, there's nothing more to be said, and there's an end of it."

"There's an end of it," Erica said to herself as her father sauntered from the room.

She had asked if the story was true, but she had not doubted its truth. As unhesitatingly as she had accepted the hideous tale of Barty's wickedness, she accepted the tale which exculpated him. It seemed to her, looking back, that she had not made one effort in defence of him—the man in whom till then she had passionately believed; yet now, when for the first time she regarded the matter in the clear light of reason and of truth, she saw that the thing was impossible, that it could not be.

This madman, this Harcourt, had befooled her and cheated her out of the happiness of her life! That was what "the end of it" meant for Erica. She had thrown away the one thing which "made for" blessedness; and missing that the world was empty for her. She was young, and for the rest of all the dragging years she

would carry a heart as sick and as sorry as through this barren twelvemonth.

A year—only a year yet! And during that year she had been cured, she had told herself, a dozen times. But the love-fever is said to be of a deceitful nature, having its recoveries and relapses, its periods when the pain and the thirst and the restlessness are quite abated, and the patient believes in a cure only to find himself plunging into the old delirium again, only to find the old pain still at the heart, the old fever, the old passion, raging more strongly than ever.

Erica went down upon her knees before the fire and looked at the blaze with dry eyes that ached, and thought of the suffering that her want of faith had caused her. She thought of that "agony of renunciation," of the chill and ache of separation, of the dumb pain and sorrow of her breast; and anger as well as sadness filled her at her own undoing.

Had ever there been in all the history of woman-kind such a dupe as she, such a false and faithless lover, such a feeble failure? What did he think—what could he have thought of her?

Always that sin of which he was accused had been so present to her mind, it had seemed to her that the reason of her refusal of him must be clear to Barty too. But now?

Well, now he would be free to marry Lady Dalling

He would be at liberty to claim that yellow head and handsome form for his own, to possess himself of the fair face, the wide, good-humoured smile—all—all but the roving glance, and, perchance, the roving heart.

Erica laughed bitterly, tightening her clasped fingers, as she recognised that her own fatuous folly had restored Sir Hugh Barty to that old love of his. Yes, Lady Dalling would have her chance over again, but no second chance could come to Erica.

"It was not," she said to herself—"it never was that he cared for me. Never! Only I had shown him"—she set her teeth tightly there, and her eyes glittered with bitter self-contempt—"it had to be done. But it was an escape. Oh, what an escape he had!"

And then there came a ring at the outer door which startled Erica, and she sprang to her feet; and there was a voice in the hall and a step——

Was she going as mad as Harcourt? Had much thinking of Sir Hugh Barty turned her brain?

She grasped the oak mantel-board with both her hands for support, and her heart seemed to stop beating, and her figure swayed a little. Until that step which had wrought such havoc with her nerves was in the room she could not turn her head, and then——

Then Barty, coming into the warm room, in his overcoat and muffler, a white cape of snow about his shoulders, his eyes dazzled by the subdued light of the

lamp, became aware of Erica Birch standing silent and motionless before him, pale, with wide, frightened eyes.

"Are you all right—quite safe?" he said hurriedly, hardly conscious what words he used, his voice—from the long tramp on that coarse night from the station, perhaps; surely with Barty it could not have been from emotion—quite hoarse and strained.

"I have been horribly frightened about you," he said.

Then, in his relief from his past, evidently so foolish terror, and in a sort of shame of it, looking in Erica's face that smiled quiveringly, with eyes swimming in tears, he laughed. A short, rather unsteady laugh it was—a sound which might as well have gone by the name of a sob as a laugh.

And the next thing he knew, Erica's tremulous lips were under his, and Erica was panting and gasping for breath in his arms.

* * * * *

"What made you send me away before?"

"I had been told a lie about you, which I weakly and wickedly believed."

"About me? What?"

She shook her head.

"You won't tell me?"

"No."

"In two minutes I would make you, only that I know what it is."

"Then do not tell me—ever—please."

"It is that wretched old story of Eva Dalling, which no one will ever do me the kindness to forget."

She did not contradict him.

"And that is an old and wretched story?"

"Old and worn out, and utterly wearisome."

She drew a long breath of infinite content.

"Ah, I am so happy!" she said.

* * * *

"What *made* you think that there was danger to me?"

"The generally soft and maudlin condition of mind to which you have reduced me. My thoughts, for a year past, have refused to become active in any direction but one. If I had heard that an earthquake or a flood was imminent anywhere on the face of the inhabited globe, I should have hastened mentally to place you in its vicinity. If news had been conveyed to me of a menagerie breaking loose, my imagination, lively in only one direction, would have depicted the most deadly of its members as staying the pangs of hunger upon you. Hearing that a maniac was at large, I naturally, and of the fatuity for which you are responsible, decide in my own mind that he has made for you."

"It is so sweet—so sweet of you to care!"

"At St. Pancras I saw that the officials, whose lives, for the time being, I made a burden to them, were in

two minds about detaining me as the lunatic of whom I was in search."

"And you thought that he had come on in the train with me? Oh, but he looked so ill and weak—I should not have been afraid. And Audrey was with me."

"Ah, I had forgotten all about Audrey. I told you that I am capable of remembering only you."

"And, oh, I love you for that!" she said to him.

The snow thawed upon his coat, dropped about him as he stood upon the hearth-rug, a flake or two, which had somehow attached themselves to her bonny brown hair, had melted among Erica's soft coils, yet still they stood so close together that their shadows, where they fell upon the wall, showed grotesquely as the shadow of one.

"For how long?" she asked him once, very softly, in a shamed, shy whisper.

"Since quite the first, I think," he answered, feeling honestly sure that it must have been so, that there never could have been a time when he had known and not loved her. "And you?"

"Oh, always—always—always!" she assured him with an enraptured self-abandonment. "And you have been the only one. There never has been, even for a moment, any but you."

And when Dicky Birch came down, fresh and smiling behind his wide shirt-front and the red berry in his

button-hole, he glanced from Barty, still standing over the fire in the great-coat, upon which the snow was all melted, to the chair close by upon which Erica sat

“pale as ashes,
All kin' o' smily roun' the lips,
All teary roun' the lashes.”

And Dicky, not guessing that he was welcoming a new son-in-law, was very delighted to welcome his old friend, receiving his unexpected appearance with well-bred equanimity. He had never habituated himself to inquiring very closely into motive, and was content to see as far into things in general as an inch from his own nose.

Sitting up with Barty after their familiar fashion, when the house was quiet, he was made aware of the load-star which had attracted his friend to Grainge in time for the Christmas festivities. He showed a cheery pleasure at the fine prospect opening to his daughter, and an honest anxiety that he should be acquitted of any designs upon his eligible son-in-law that was to be.

“You know how it was, Barty. I was careful about the youngsters—I always kept her out of their way—but I never thought of you. I don't know why I shouldn't have thought of you, of course, but——”

“It was my bald head, I expect,” Barty said ruefully, putting up his long hand with its familiar, caressing

touch to that part of his head from which the fair hair had receded.

"No, no, my dear fellow, not that—not that," Birch said eagerly. "But that you were a more sensible fellow than the rest, and——"

"Erica would thank you for the compliment if she were here."

"Eric—bless the girl!—has nothing to do with it—nothing whatever—or, that is, I never dreamt she could have—never dreamt. But there—well—you know what you're about, but it's a lottery, Barty—an infernal lottery, mind you. My Eric—she's as good as an angel, and as pure—and sometimes I think—by heaven I do!—she's as lovely——"

"Hear, hear!" softly from Sir Hugh.

"Only it's a lottery; and if you don't draw a winning number it's hell, Barty. Take my word for it, man. I've been there and I know. Good God, I've been there! You know my experience, Hugh; you've heard my tale?"

The hasty intimation that Hugh had done so was not, of course, efficacious in stopping its repetition.

"And I loved that woman—I worshipped her! And she fooled me to the last—to the last! And then I had her at my feet—shrieking—shrieking to me to have mercy on her. And I had—and I pray that that deed, at least, may be written down in my favour,

Barty; but it was no use—no use. And when they're made like that you can't save them—no, not if you give your soul. And she's dead—God help her! and—you've heard the tale before, Barty. And you know me. I bear up. I carry a smiling face, and there's not many to guess——”

He blew his nose loudly here, and wiped the tears from his bright blue eyes; and as he paused to do so, reflected, perhaps, that the sins and the shames of Erica's mother were not the choicest subject on which to regale Erica's sweetheart; and that the extreme precariousness of the matrimonial market was not an encouraging theme on which to dilate to the latest Benedict.

It didn't do much harm, however, any more than the subsequent rhapsody did good: a disquisition on the joys of married life—the only perfect life for man on earth—where all his pleasures were doubled, his griefs halved, his aims hallowed, his life completed, with all the other commonplaces given forth for the occasion with the spirit and fire of impromptu.

Sir Hugh Barty, lying back in his chair with his pipe in his mouth, leant that portion of an ear which was always at Dicky's service to these dissertations, and nursed his own illusions, and dreamed his own dreams. He had, happily for him—and being comically aware of his own absurdity the while—arrived at that point

of foolishness when it was easy to him to believe in any ridiculous, impossible bliss accruing to him from the life-long companionship of the woman he loved—who, for her part, inhabited a world of his creating for her, where her earthly parentage and surroundings having dropped off from her, she was left, in the heart into which she had been miraculously born, reigning alone.

When Barty, having with unusual alacrity cut short the nightly confabulation, went upstairs, he found Erica, as she had promised him, lurking on the dimly-lit landing above.

"It's all right," he said. He put down the candle and the book he was carrying on a convenient oak chest, and took her into his arms. "I've told him, and he's very pleased."

"Of course," she said, whispering the words with a touch of regret. "There wasn't much doubt of that."

"You didn't want him to refuse his consent, did you?"

"No. But I can't help wishing a little there wasn't everything—*everything* on your side, and nothing at all on mine."

On this point he endeavoured, after his own fashion, probably, to reassure her.

"Daddy—auntie—all of them will think what a good marriage I'm making. They'll never believe how little all that is to me—that the good to me is to be

marrying you. And your people—they'll think I set a trap; they'll say I caught you."

He looked down gravely into the face raised to him with such a pretty anxiety.

"I'm such an old bird," he said, with a little regret on his side for the lost youth and freshness of heart which were still so conspicuously hers. "They'll give me credit, surely, for walking into the trap with open eyes."

"Good-night, Hugh. You must let me go now. Yes, indeed. And you won't forget me till I see you again—till the morning?"

"I swear that I will not forget."

"Hugh, wasn't it wonderful our meeting at the Zoo that day? I had not been there for two years—quite."

"And I not for ten."

"Wasn't it wonderful?"

"It was Fate. I knew—generally—that Fate would not keep you and me apart."

"Hush! Oh, hush!" she said in an awed voice, clinging closer to him. "It might, Hugh—it might even now."

"It mightn't," he declared with impious conviction, and tightened his clasp of her for a moment. And then Dicky Birch's step was heard below, and she fell back from him against the door of her room, smiling at him and breathing fast, the crossed folds of the pretty white dress she had worn at dinner rising and falling.

"Take your candle—quick! Quick, Hugh! He is trying the hall-door."

"He will have to put out the lamps—there is an age——"

"He is coming!"

"One instant—yes, one. You love me?"

"Hugh—oh, Hugh!"

"May God for ever bless you and keep you!" he said.

Then he snatched up candle and book, and prepared to beat a hasty retreat; but in a moment he was back and standing threateningly before her.

"Now, what was that for?" he asked. "Pray, what did that sigh mean?"

"Things are at a pretty pass! May not I even sigh without asking leave? Hugh, daddy is really coming up the stairs!"

"You may not sigh unless I know the reason. You shall tell me the reason, if I have to send him down again to make you—now then."

"It is so foolish—and so wicked! I was thinking of poor Mr. Harcourt."

"Harcourt?" in a tone of the deepest disappointment and disgust. "*Harcourt!*"

"It is horribly wicked! Hugh, I was thanking God that He had let Mr. Harcourt go mad."

CHAPTER V.

SHADY GOES A-DIGGING.

AFTER that not much did they trouble themselves at Flint Hall about the fate of Lucian Harcourt. When merriment flagged once or twice during the next day, he came in usefully to create a diversion. He lurked behind a door, springing forth with maniacal howls; he suddenly tapped at a window in the dark. He was prepared, with the help of a plaster bust taken from the hall, with Dicky's tall hat and top coat, with Alfy's patent shoes extended in a life-like fashion on trees, to repose on Audrey's bed. After that the joke grew stale—he was forgotten.

Once Dicky had spoken of writing to Sir Joseph to express a hope that his son was safe; but Dicky was not much of a hand at correspondence, and generally got over his duty letters by forgetting to write them; besides, he reflected truly enough that any reply Sir Joseph could give must be painful to the father's feelings; and the sin of omission is pleasanter, if not safer, than that of commission.

As for Barty, he had forgotten the terrors that had

beset him during his journey down, being more than half ashamed of them, and wholly glad to have the remembrance crowded out by pleasanter and more engrossing things.

"Harcourt's safe enough," he would say impatiently, with a touch of the contemptuous indifference with which he had of old regarded the younger man. It seemed so absurd ever to have been in any sort of fear of Harcourt—"Lucie" Harcourt, the under-sized, self-inflated little fool!

"He went mad through having no sense of humour," Sir Hugh said. "He was always standing on his poor little fragment of dignity, and thinking the rest of the world were directing all their energies to displace him. He had positively no sense of proportion, poor devil! he never knew when he was making himself ridiculous; he couldn't understand that you weren't always either thinking him a genius or conspiring to belittle him. Oh yes, I dare say he wasn't devoid of brains; I have Erica's word for it, although women aren't reliable critics on that score. (You were uncommonly in love with his musical performances, you know, Erica, and so on.) But to my thinking he was an immortal bore, and something—since I'm on the subject (and the poor beggar's so down on his luck it is our duty as good Christians to hit him hard)—something of a cad too. For a man

who is always thinking of himself, and the effect he produces, must be a cad——”

So he despised the unfortunate young man after his old easy-going fashion, and had not the reason for hating him which Erica could have given, which she had said to herself over and over again was of such a nature that she never could give him, but which, in spite of the seeming impossibility, she would, probably, divulge to him within a week of her wedding-day.

She could not explain to her lover why it seemed to her that amends should be made to that ill-favoured and, of late, exceedingly impecunious individual, Shadrach Bush; but Barty, having heard that new version of last year's tragedy which Dicky had had to give, was also conscious of compunction towards the ex-farm-steward.

On the morning after Christmas Day he sought out and interviewed this old aversion of his. He made no recantation in words of the mistake he had made, putting his apology in a form more calculated to appeal to Shady's gross sensibilities; and finding that the man had been for some time out of work, and had no prospect of getting any, he straightway sent him forth, with somewhat vague directions, to “go and dig” in the gardens of Bigby Manor,

"Mr. Shady Bush, you *may* be an injured innocent," Barty said as he turned away from him; "but in that case Nature has treated you with uncommon shabbiness, for you are without exception the most infernal-looking blackguard I have ever come across."

While Barty forced himself to perform that act of justice with regard to the man he had misjudged, Erica betook herself once more to the blacksmith's cottage to visit Penelope's mother. When she still believed that cruel tale which had seemed to be confirmed to her there, the place was hateful to her, and she would have given it a wide berth, fearful of hearing some further ugly detail of the story which had caused her such pain. But things were different now. It was no longer in the power of mortal man or woman—save only of Hugh himself—seriously to harm or affright her; and she, in her gladness and security, wanted to see the place where she had suffered so, to hear the tongue which had so wounded her, and whose accents she had remembered since with such a shrinking of the nerves.

"I heared as you'd come, miss, and I hoped maybe you'd drop in and look on me," Mrs. Bye said, and wiped a chair for her visitor. "Sit ye down, miss, if you'll make so free."

She herself was as well as might be expected, she said in answer to Erica's polite inquiries. She hadn't never been up to much, and she couldn't hope to be it now, all things considered.

"Bye, miss?" and she sighed heavily and shook her head. "He ha'n't heart for nothin', and if I was to tell you different I should be a demeanin' myself to a lie, and that you wouldn't be wishful I should do. He've a high and a quick natur', he don't make no complainin'—I don't say as he do—he go about his work—and you may have heared your pa say, miss, there ain't a man but Bye he'd trust to shoe his horses within a dozen mile of him—but, mark my words, miss, his heart's broke. His heart was in his gal, and his heart's broke."

Here, accepting Erica's invitation to take one of her own chairs, Mrs. Bye sat down with her apron to her mouth.

"As for me, miss, night nor day she ain't never out o' my mind. Night and day, miss, that's borne in on me, ay, and on her father, tho' he ain't the man to speak on't—that our gal never done that vi'lence to herself. She met wi' foul play. Tha's wha's borne in on us. Many a time I ha' thought it out, and thought it out till I know how 'twas done, and as good as seen it done."

Erica tried to put aside that new version of the tale, but in vain. There was evidence which Mrs. Bye brought forward to substantiate her suspicion, however trivial and unconvincing such evidence seemed to Erica. For instance, there had been received a letter from that aunt in Yorkshire to whom it had been thought probable Penelope would apply. This letter, which was duly handed up for Erica's perusal, set forth the fact that some few weeks before her death Penny had prepared the writer for a lengthened visit, and had begged of her to be her friend, to stand by her and keep her secret from her father and mother. There were, beside, a hundred traits in the girl's character—her terror of death, her fear of offending God, her gentleness and shrinking from all violent ways—which the mother now retailed and dwelt on, to prove how unlikely was such an one to put an end to her own life.

Erica listened, gently incredulous, full of pity, thinking gratefully of her own new happiness, remembering how tragically the love-story of the other girl had ended.

"And about that other matter I made so bold as to speak to you about, miss," Mrs. Bye went on. "There's a somethin' I have wished to show you in that matter. I ha' put it out o' my old man's sight, for there's no sayin' how such as him take things. 'Tis certain they

han't the know o' womenfolk, and so I ha' telled 'em times and often!"

Still talking on, she removed some china ornaments and a Bible and an orange-coloured wool mat from a large much-polished desk, standing, with a tea-tray for background, on a side table. Having opened the desk and fumbled for a minute among its contents, she drew forth a big and cheap-looking silver locket.

"That come home wi' my poor gal's box from the Hall," she explained, her voice dropping. "'Tis one I ha' marked times and times on her neck of a Sunday. Shady Bush he bought it come las' Michaelmas twelve-month at Rogues' Fair at Sedborough. Miss, that ain't Shady's picter she ha' got in it."

She opened the tawdry locket as she spoke, and held it before her visitor's eyes; and there, displayed to Erica's gaze, were the handsome features and large brilliant eyes of Lucian Harcourt.

"And it was he of whom you thought when you spoke to me before," Erica said.

She sighed to think how much unhappiness she would have been spared if she could have seen that locket sooner.

"You heard of his a-comin' to gaze on her, dead?"

Mrs. Bye went on. "Ah, his evil conscience gripped him there. His screams was awful."

"Poor man!" Erica said hastily, with a shudder. "We must not judge him, Mrs. Bye. We do not know how he may have suffered. We have had bad news of Mr. Harcourt. We have heard that he is mad—quite mad."

"Miss, I'll tell you what I thought you was a-goin' to say to me. I thought you was a-going' to say, 'Mrs. Bye,' says you, 'he's dead.' And I'll tell you for why. Shady Bush—he have seen his ghost."

"Oh, Mrs. Bye, what nonsense!"

"I ha' got Shady's word for it if't be. He was a-makin' a short cut through the grove from the shop, where he'd been to lay out his little moneys o' Christmas Eve—for he ha' lived only hand to mouth like, as you may say, since your pa took agin him, Miss—a short cut to his own home, and the snow was on the ground, and the moon was up, and he seen the ghost o' Harcourt a-standin' by that tree that's lightnin'-struck—where my po'r gal come by her death. We'd heared tell as how the man was ill, and in a bad way—and I ain't sayin' he hain't got his desserts, though small good that'll do to my Penny now—and I say to Shady, says I, 'Bor, sure as nothin', Harcourt's dead.'"

The next morning Mrs. Bye, who was an early riser, looking across her grassy back-yard, made out a familiar figure passing along the road which separated her especial domain from her husband's workshop. The fire was already lit in the forge, and the sparks flew in answer to the regular strokes upon the anvil; but the shades of night were not yet fully lifted from the raw and gloomy morning as the blacksmith's wife peered across the dank, wet grass to the misty road.

"Shady Bush! What, ha' you got a job o' work that you're off so arly i' the mornin'?" she called to the figure shambling by.

The man stopped by the little gate of the yard, and looked toward her without speaking; and Mrs. Bye, having slipped her feet into pattens, and thrown a shawl about her head, crossed the wet yard where the hens were "scrapping" for their breakfast.

"Why, where be you off to in this d'rection at sech a time o' day?" Mrs. Bye inquired.

Shady nodded adown the shades of the road, which lay before him.

"I ha' got a job o' work," he said; "down to the Court at Bigby."

"Please God you'll be paid for the wear and tear

o' shoe-leather, then. A matter o' three mile a-tween a man and 's work is a po'r look on, to my thinkin', Shady, bor. Be you a-goin' on to the land, or to help the keepers, or what, now?"

"He said as I were to dig the ga'den," Shady Bush said indifferently. He had not been too proud to accept service under Sir Hugh, the man against whom he had nursed a grudge in his slow mind for many a month; but he would have considered it much beneath his dignity to have evinced any interest in the work which had been given him to do. "He's a-comin' down there this noon-time," he said. "P'raps he's a-goin' to show me how to dig, and where I'm to do it."

"Sir Hugh? Happen he'll prove a good friend to you, Shady. Ha' you heared about the t'other one, Shady?" dropping her voice. "You hain't seen no more of t'other one's ghost, eh?"

"I hain't looked for it. I take good care I don't go by that tree no more in a hurry arter dark."

"Tha's his evil conscience drag his sperrit there, Shady. I'd lay my life on it. 'Twas there he done the deed, and there his conscience drag him."

"There he were, sure enough," Shady said; "and mortal bad his sperrit looked, Mis' Bye, whether 'twas him or whether 'tweren't as done it."

The blacksmith's wife drew in her lips, and shook her head.

"'Twere him, bor," she said. "Take my word for't. And I ha' heared news on him, Shady. He's mad, bor, a ragin' madman. The Lord, that don't pay wi' money, ha' paid him. His evil conscience hain't gi'en him no rest, and Harcourt's ragin' mad."

CHAPTER VI.

THE WHITE DRAWING-ROOM.

WITH Erica Birch at his side, Sir Hugh Barty went through the dismantled rooms of the house in which he had been born, and where all his youth had been spent—the house where he and she were to spend their lives together, where he hoped, “the long day’s task” being done, to fall asleep at last with her face beside him.

It is said that a man has two natures: one to face the world with, and one to show a woman when he loves her. Certain it is that in those brief days of his engagement, Barty, the habitually reticent, had talked more of himself than he had ever done in all his life before—had talked with evident satisfaction and eager delight, his egotism, after all, having been only carefully hidden away for all these years, not annihilated by any means.

There had been little in his later years on which he cared to dilate to her, and he had gone back naturally enough to that period of his early youth which it gave him most pleasure to remember, drawing upon

his memory for events and scenes of that time. Very dear to all of us are the pictures which the mind has stored of that enchanted period, dear and vividly remembered, but kept to ourselves, for the most part, in our sad wisdom, Fate kindly providing for each of us sooner or later one pair of eyes before which the precious panorama may be unrolled.

The Barty who peopled the spacious, dreary rooms for Erica with the images of the past, who showed her how closely the home of his childhood was bound about his heart, whose voice shook with tenderness as, standing before his father's portrait, he told of how the old man had helped him through some boyish scrape, and had ever been his dearest, closest friend—this was a very different person from the Barty who had growled and jeered and flouted at all sentiment, enveloping himself in his indolent reserve, lost to all outer interests in the pages of the *Field*, finding congenial occupation only in his dogs and horses, his guns, and the contemplation of the pigs in the sty.

On that afternoon when Erica accompanied him to Bigby Court, Barty had made an appointment with the head-keeper. He had many matters to settle with him, much to hear about, many orders to give. He was a much-indulged, exacting old man, that head-keeper; Sir William and Sir William's father had been as wax

in his hands; as for Sir Hugh—he was perhaps fonder of Sir Hugh than of anyone on earth—he had waited long enough for him; now that he had got him into his clutches he did not intend to let him out easily—there was “a deal” for Sir Hugh to see to, he said grimly.

“You can manage without me for half an hour?” Hugh said doubtfully, looking from the watch he held in his hand to Erica. “He insists on my going down to the wood—we are going to have a day there on Friday—and——”

“Oh, go of course,” Erica said, smiling at the grave and handsome old man who stood, hat in hand, behind his master.

He had been presented to his future mistress by Barty, and the young woman had shaken hands with the old servant, had assured him she had heard a great deal about him, and was evidently bent on the keeper’s subjection after that pleasant, coquettish fashion of hers which arose only from an innocent desire to be loved, and, if a failing, was surely a very amiable one—one, too, which even her victims were ready to pardon.

“We shall have to step out briskly to get to Bramley Corner in a quarter of an hour, Sir Hugh, and—’tis to the further end of the wood where the young firs was planted we’re a-goin’, by your leave—let alone the walk home again.”

“You hear?” Sir Hugh said. He smiled, but his

eyes regarded Erica very wistfully. It really appeared to him no light matter to be torn from his future wife for that cruel length of time. "Skipper always was the most domineering old tyrant—you know you were, Skipper. Then if it should be three-quarters of an hour?"

"I shall be quite, quite happy. Do not mind me. Do not let Sir Hugh hurry, Skipper."

So, with a nod and a half-sigh, he had turned on his heel and left her.

Left to herself, Erica wandered for a few minutes about the empty rooms. Such furniture as it had pleased Sir William's widow to remove she had taken, so that most of the rooms were partially dismantled; but in nearly all the carpets had been left, and Erica's foot fell silently on the thick pile. Turning into a spacious and handsome room which Hugh had called the White Drawing-room, she addressed her steps toward a French window opening upon the rose-garden, which he had told her had been planned by her lover's mother. As she moved across the empty space with the gliding, easy step of a finely-formed and perfectly healthy young woman, painfully conscious the while of the silence and the solitude, wondering anxiously how many minutes of that forty-five she was to spend there

alone had elapsed, she became conscious of a movement, of someone coming to meet her. She turned with a start of surprise from the French window to confront a beautiful young woman with a round, fair face, with startled, black-lashed gray eyes, with a tall figure becomingly clothed in homespun and handsome furs—with her own reflection, in short, in the panel of looking-glass which, draped with amber silk curtains, adorned the wall.

After that Erica lost her desire to inspect the rose-gardens. Laughing at herself, but with her heart thumping unduly in her breast, she turned away precipitately from the lonely grandeur of the White Drawing-room, with its soft carpets and amber draperies, and ghostly panel of looking-glass, and crossed the great stone entrance-hall—her footsteps sounding there with alarming distinctness, echoing to the heavily carved ceiling, reverberating down empty, unseen corridors—and pushing open the massive front-door, of which the key had been left on the inside, she ran down the half-dozen steps beneath the white pillared porch, and, once again in the open air, breathed more freely.

She crossed the gravel sweep which lay before the front of the house, and the stretch of smooth grass, and leaned upon the low iron railing which divided the garden from the park. Which path across the park had Hugh and old Skipper taken? Was that the plan-

tation—there, in the distance, the Scotch firs black against the wintry sky—to which they had gone? Was Bramley Corner to be seen from where she stood, and would it be very, very much longer before Hugh came back?

How silent it was, that great park, and how melancholy! and the great house at the back of her, staring upon her, when she looked hastily round, with its many blank windows! Erica set herself with an effort to recall some of those childish reminiscences which Hugh had poured into her ears. There, where the brown rushes stirred weirdly in the passing breeze, was the pond in which her lover had nearly been drowned in trying to save a blind puppy of his brother's, which a keeper had had orders to destroy. Was that the ash-tree against which Hugh's youthful head had crashed when his pony had bolted with him on his first riding-lesson?

She lifted her arms from the railing, and walked slowly round the side of the house to the huge kitchen-garden, where the rabbit-run still was, which Barty (with the help of the estate carpenter, a couple of gardeners, and a stable-boy) was said to have built for himself. There, too, was the pigeon-house, scene of the first tragic incident in Hugh's life, where he had undergone agonies of grief and rage and remorse, never, perhaps, to be paralleled through all his after-career, on

discovering that he had shut up that monster cat, whose depredations among his pets had already constituted it his greatest terror, among his innocent white fantails.

Erica walked across and looked at the empty cage, and pictured the mangled victims and the fierce, wild eyes of the destroyer, which all those years ago had met the gaze of the frightened little boy. Common-place and trivial as the incident was, it had made some impression on her—the caged, pretty creatures, housed with their terrible foe; the boy's passion of pity and pain! She shuddered as she walked away.

Ah, how dreary and desolate it all was without Hugh! How very silent! How much longer would he be? She looked at the watch upon her wrist. He had been gone twelve minutes.

There was the summer-house, of which she had heard. Its oaken walls were hung around with odd-looking excrescences, but from elm-trees felled in the park; which knobby and knotted decorations Hugh, in his baby days, peeping affrightedly in on them in their semi-obscurity, and relying on information received from his big brother, had believed to be the heads of Blue-beard's wives. There had been a dark period in his early career, the present baronet had told his sweetheart, when he had supposed his own father—the gentlest of men, of whom Hugh had been passionately fond, and who had aspired to no more than a modest

couple of wives, to whom he had been the tenderest of spouses, for his own share—to be the much-married hero of the nursery-tale himself. The dark secret which he believed he had, to his sorrow, discovered had been locked up in the little boy's own breast, causing him nights and days of misery, dreadful dreams of discovery and sharp retribution, hideous awakings, with choking heart-beats and cold dewes of terror—his horror of his father's shortcomings not at all detracting from his devoted attachment to his person.

“I never told a soul before,” Hugh had said, laughing, when he had related the ridiculous experience. “Phew! I vow it is a weight off my mind, even now.”

Erica tired of the kitchen-garden. She missed seeing Shadrach Bush at work in one corner of it. Had she been aware of it, she would have welcomed even his presence gladly. Shady, for his part, made no sign, but he watched his new employer's future wife as she moved about the garden.

“Happen he ha' sent *her* to tell me what to dig and how to du it,” he said with slow scorn. “I don't take no orders from a woman, nayther.”

Then he spat upon his hands, and applied himself to his uncongenial task of delving again.

Erica was round at the front of the house once more. There was the broad gravel sweep, the smooth oblong of grass, the sundial in the centre, and, beyond,

the park—trees and grass as far as the eye could see. She mounted the steps beneath the wide pillars of the porch, and looked over the expanse. No sign of Hugh returning. Her watch told her, indeed, that only about half that three-quarters of an hour had elapsed which must pass before he might be expected. With a sigh, Erica pushed open the heavy door. What a fool she was to be so stupidly nervous! What could harm her there in Hugh's house, in the middle of the day—Hugh himself almost within call. She was disgusted with herself, and ashamed. Hugh should not know—he would despise her! A woman with such nerves as hers was a burden on any man's indulgence. Of what was she afraid, in the full light of day, an hour before the sun would set behind those black fir-trees to the right, among which Hugh had vanished? Not even ghosts appeared at such an hour.

Now, Erica might have said, with Dr. Johnson, that she did not believe in ghosts, but that she was mortally afraid of them. Instantly into her recollection there rushed the tale Mrs. Bye had told about Harcourt's ghost—that it had stood by the lightning-struck tree in the grove. What a foolish tale, and how wrong of Mrs. Bye to have repeated such nonsense! and how she wished the good woman had chosen other ears in which to confide the ridiculous story! Erica remembered that tree so well, and the form which had lain

at its foot, and the outstretched hand and the deadly knife. At all moments of nervous excitation the scene came back to her still, and now—now there was something superadded: there was that guilty spirit of Lucian Harcourt, which—— Well, there was Shadrach Bush's idle tale.

Erica would not close the great outer door behind her; she dared not shut herself in with the chill and the loneliness of the place. How her footsteps echoed through the hall! And here, quite by chance, not remembering in which direction she had bent her steps—here she was in that White Drawing-room again in which she had been so foolishly startled.

Yes; this must be it. There were the amber-silk hangings, the painted walls, the heavily-carved ceiling—there was the panel of glass, from which her own image had seemed to move towards her. What a foolish woman, to be frightened by her own face in the glass! She looked at the reflection now, as she advanced into the room, and it looked back at her a little wildly—only her own face! If it had been another's now—Lucian Harcourt's——!

With a shudder she averted her eyes. They fell on the French window—on eyes brilliant with the light of madness, meeting her own—on a forlorn and ashen face, where a week's growth of beard had sprouted, pressed against the pane—on an attenuated form,

where the soiled and earth-stained clothes hung loosely.

God! Harcourt!

It was only for a moment that she saw him. He was gone while she stood dumb, rooted with terror—gone so silently and so swiftly that it might have been, indeed, the spirit of that Harcourt whom she had known, only that it was not—that not for one instant could she cheat her heart with that hope.

She turned and fled. She must escape through that open front-door—if strength and time were given her to escape—to Hugh; or, her strength failing her, or Harcourt lurking near, she must lock the door upon him and wait within till Hugh—Hugh and rescue—came.

Either expedient filled her with horror. To run with failing limbs through the park—uncertain of her locality, missing Hugh, perhaps—a maniac at her heels! To be shut up in hideous solitude in that house of terrors, while the madman prowled without!

She flew to the outer door, which she had left ajar.

It was shut and locked!

She could have shrieked aloud at that discovery, but that her tongue clave drily to her mouth and the power to utter a sound had left her. In a frenzy she

threw herself against the door, and beat upon it with her hands. The great solid leaves did not even rattle with the shock.

Hark! In the stillness, echoing along the arched ceiling, and through the vast corridors, a footstep—a footstep swift, and stealthy, and light!

In the confusion of her terror she could not tell in what direction the step had sounded—but it was at no great distance. It was on the level on which she stood.

She crossed the hall, and, clutching sickly at the banisters, dragged herself up the wide, softly-carpeted stairs; and when she reached the first landing, where the afternoon light of the winter's day came softly through high-painted windows upon her pallid face, she crouched down, unable, through the trembling of her limbs, to proceed, and, still clinging to the heavy railings, let a wave of confused forgetfulness flow over her.

For a space—she knew not for how long—she lost recollection of circumstance and place. She was lying in Hugh's arms, and her father was coming nearer and nearer, only Hugh held her and she could not move; and he was telling her, with proud and tender confidence, that Fate itself could no longer injure him and her. She was a white dove, bruised, and with wings

broken with beating against the cruel bars, and Hugh—Hugh had shut her in a cage with her destroyer!

A step was on the stairs below, and partial consciousness had come back to her, and with it a certain strength to fly.

After that a period of wild rushing from room to room, always pursued by a terror, none the less hideous for being but ill-defined—down long, silent corridors, through lofty, handsome rooms, up more stairs, through narrow gloomy passages, through other rooms opening out endlessly one to another—ever the pursuing step sounding in her brain, if not actually on her ear, only the extreme of human terror keeping her ahead of what she fled from.

And about it all a strange familiarity, a sensation of having known that horror of pursuit before—of having rushed, with the same nameless terror upon her, through the big empty rooms, through the echoing corridors, in some previous existence, many and many a time before.

At last—she knew not how—she was on the ground-floor again, and in the White Drawing-room, and her strength was exhausted and she could no more. As Erica dragged herself across the room, she saw in the glass before her the image of the horror which had pursued her. The confusion lifted momentarily from her mind, and she knew that it was Harcourt who followed her, and that he was mad. She saw the reflec-

tion of the lean, altered face, with its ugly growth of beard, its eager, moving lips, its eyes wild and hollow and mad. In his hands, spasmodically clenching themselves, was no weapon. Through Erica's now-failing senses flashed the thought, How would he kill her?

Then she, having staggered to the opposite wall, clutched at the amber draperies, failed to reach them, swayed backward, and fell a senseless heap upon the floor.

CHAPTER VII.

MR. BUSH MAKES HIS FORTUNE.

SHADY BUSH, at work in his corner of the kitchen-garden, had no watch to tell him how the time went, but by the position of the sun in the afternoon sky he may have divined the fact that another good hour's digging was due to Sir Hugh before his day-labourer was justified in striking work and betaking himself homeward.

But Mr. Bush was pleased neither with his employer nor the task that had been set him. Over his slow mind there had dawned the notion that he had been made a fool of—set to dig, not because digging was desirable, but because it was desirable that Shadrach Bush should work. Now, Shadrach had not a proud stomach above his kind, nor was he a particularly sensitive person, but there was something in this view of the case which he felt himself called on to resent. It savoured of charity, that kind of assistance. Shady was not above accepting charity, but he was above accepting it graciously; above all, he was averse to the process known as “working it out.”

So Mr. Bush scraped the soil from his heavy boots upon his spade with a lowering look upon his not prepossessing countenance, and in a not very amiable frame of mind.

"I'll ha' no more play-actin'," he said; "a-comin' over to gi' me orders, and a-never comin' nigh nor by! Ef he want his place dug, there's work for a matter o' half a dozen men—let him set 'em to't. I ha' had enough on't."

By passing round to the side of the house, Shady knew that he could strike into a footpath through the park which would make a short cut homeward. Being so near, a curiosity, which was something outside of him, and not at all a part of his slow, apathetic nature, induced him to go still nearer, and to look into such of the lower windows as were accessible.

Of most the shutters were half closed or the blinds were drawn; but the library-window was quite unshrouded, and Shady, open-mouthed and uncomprehensive, gazed in upon the "sight o' books," unmoved to admire or to covet. He was in the act of turning away from the house, when his eyes fell upon the French window near at hand. He gave a grunt, as of one who should apologize to himself for his own folly, and, spade on shoulder, slouched over the intervening space of grass and flower-bed, and, trampling upon some branches of

Devoniensis which had fallen from the wall, looked in at the White Drawing-room window.

This is what he saw:

He saw Harcourt—quite a new Harcourt—not the Harcourt who had mooned about at Flint Hall, playing the piano and “squalling like a gal,” as had been contemptuously said of him; not that ghostly Harcourt of the grove, of whom Shady Bush had been in mortal terror; but the Harcourt of Mrs. Bye’s remarkable narration—Harcourt, alive with an insane purpose: lithe, alert with the glitter of madness in his eyes, and his mouth, beneath its ugly growth of stubbly hair, gibbering with the lust of prey.

Across the room, with its light, eager step, this figure came. Half-way, its glittering eyes fixed seemingly at about its own level on the wall, it stopped, recoiled—then, with a light of fear and ferocity in the eyes, sprang forward.

From where he stood, Bush could not see that it was the madman’s own hideous reflection in the glass panel at which he stared; but he saw that with the furious bound forward he had dashed his clenched fist at something, from which he fell back with blood dropping upon—— Wasn’t that a woman’s form upon the ground?

A lunge from a heavy shoulder upon the light frame-

work of the French window, a sudden yielding and crashing of wood and glass, and Harcourt, with knuckles raw and bleeding from the shattered glass, turned and leaped at the intruder.

There was a cry, the throwing upward of a heavy spade, a downward sweep, a thud, a groan—and stillness!

* * * * *

There were people in Bigby, Grainge and the neighbourhood, who maintained that Shady Bush had been too thorough in his treatment. Granted that a man in the moment's excitement had broken a looking-glass with his fist, was that sufficient reason that he should be put to death? it was asked. Certainly, he might have been about to attack Erica Birch; but he had no weapon, and it was quite possible he merely intended to shake hands with her. It was also possible—as that poor girl's mother now loudly maintained—that Harcourt had, in a previous fit of homicidal mania, murdered Penelope Bye; but there was not a title of evidence to prove that he had done so. Surely Mr. Bush should have given him the benefit of the doubt. Erica herself, slowly recovering from the prostration which supervened on the terrible shock she had experienced, was haunted by the thought that through her the wretched man had met his awful and sudden

death. Above all, Harcourt's unhappy father did his best to get Shady Bush convicted of manslaughter.

But the hero of the story himself was not for a moment troubled with any scruples of conscience; and, in view of the material advantages accruing to himself from the catastrophe, he manifested the indifference to hostile criticism and the stolidity natural to his kind.

"He's *daad*, sure enough," he had said, in his usual calmly monotonous tone, in answer to the frenzied inquiries addressed to him when the old keeper and his master had burst in upon that ghastly scene in the White Drawing-room. Barty, looking up distractedly for a moment from the fair unconscious face he was holding upon his heart, saw Shady Bush, leaning upon the hideously-bespattered spade, stir the body of his victim slightly with his foot, looking down upon it much as he would have looked upon the slaughtered body of a rat which had crossed his path.

Neither was Sir Hugh Barty—at that supreme moment nor in calmer hours—troubled with sentimental scruples. A deep and lasting regret that he himself had not stood for the critical period in Shadrach Bush's shoes was, next to his passionate gratitude for his future wife's delivery from a possibly horrible fate, his most powerful feeling with regard to the matter—that, and a keen admiration for, and envy of, the man who had had

such a splendid chance, and who had not lost it. Once, when some officious person mentioned in the baronet's presence the extravagance of the benefits which he had heaped upon the man:

"Oh, I have done more than that," Barty said; "I have shaken hands with him, and asked his pardon for not having intuitively grasped the fact of his being such a glorious fellow."

And after a time Erica, striving to hide the fact of her shrinking, was taken by Barty to offer her thanks to the once-despised Shadrach. This she did—being no more than ever strong-minded, and being moved by a mixture of feelings—through her tears.

Bush received the broken little emotional speech quite unmoved. He wiped the hand she had momentarily held across his lips and nose as she released it.

"He were a-comin' right at me. 'Twere him or me," he said, quite ignorant of the fact, which Barty and Erica also carefully ignored, that by so putting the matter he was taking the bloom from off the peach of action.

"It is because he killed Lucian Harcourt, not because he saved my life, that he thinks we are rewarding him," Erica said to herself with a shudder.

And although she keeps her thoughts on the matter to herself, the time will probably never come when

Lady Barty's eyes will care to fall on Shadrach Bush's stolid face.

And the shadow of the horrible fate which befell that most unfortunate one among Dicky Birch's men will for ever sadden for her the sweet remembrance of those two winters in which her own love-story was begun and ended.

THE END.

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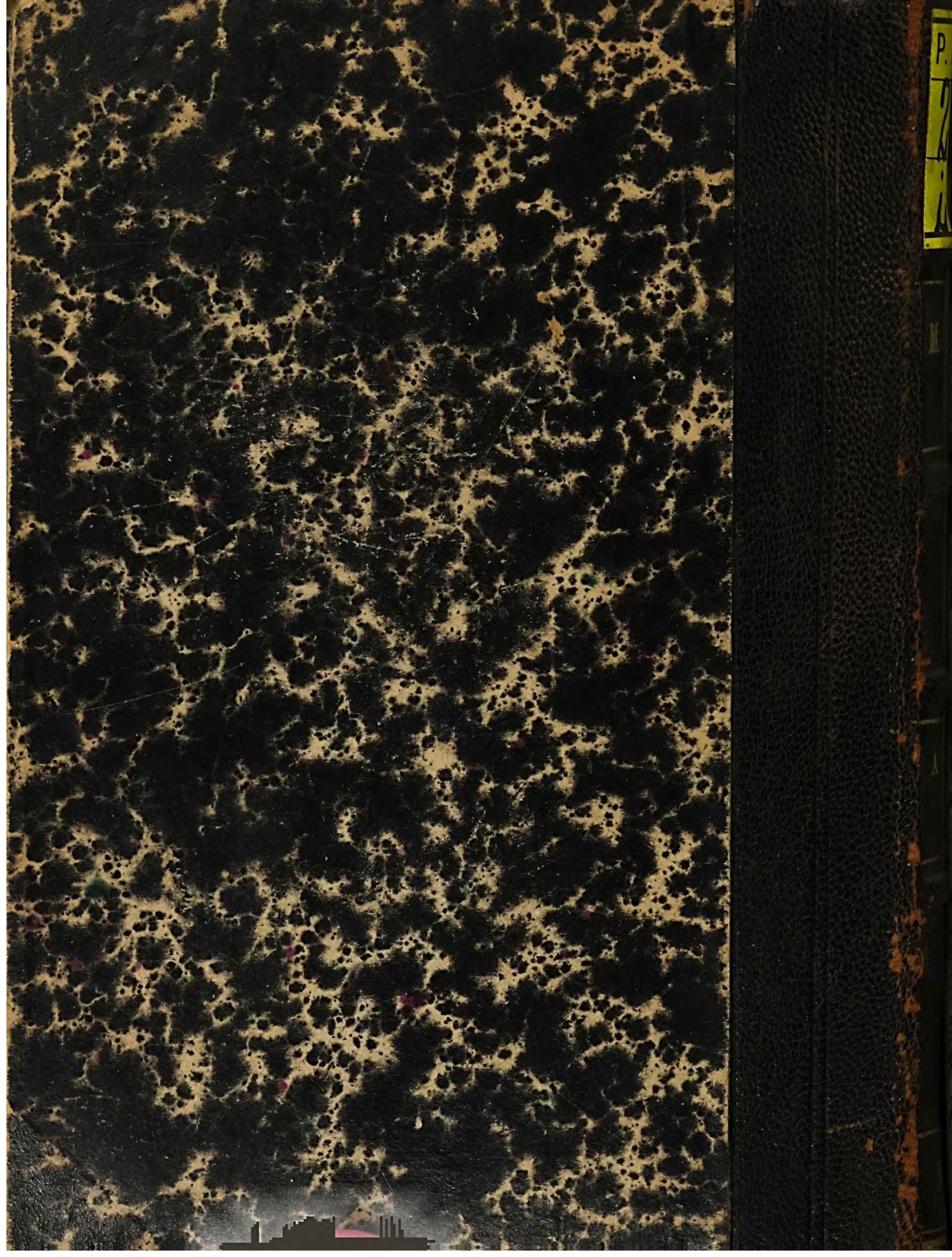
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P.o.angl. 216 i-1

urn:nbn:de:bvb:12-bsb11664608-5